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Charting the Sea in Caribbean Poetry:
Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Dionne Brand,
Alphaeus Norman, Verna Penn Moll, and Richard Georges

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Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Table of Contents	3
Summary	6
Introduction	9
Caribbean Literature and the Sea	16
The Caribbean Sea and Cultural Identity.....	18
Outline of the Thesis.....	22
Chapter One	
Creolising God: The Tidalectic Transformations of <i>The Arrivants</i>	27
Chapter Two	
‘That gray vault’: The Sea and History in <i>Omeros</i>	60
Chapter Three	
Dionne Brand and the Liquid Eroticism of <i>No Language is Neutral</i>	86
Chapter Four	
‘Before a Raging Sea’: Poetry of the British Virgin Islands	119
A Critical Preface to <i>Make Us All Islands</i>	147
Creative Component: <i>Make Us All Islands</i>	158
Table of Contents.....	159
Cross of the Griot.....	160
Her Iron Cable Rent.....	185
Eyes Heavy as Anchors	211
Bibliography.....	231
Appendices	243

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Summary

This thesis consists of a poetry manuscript and a critical component that considers the poetics and history that inform the writing of that manuscript.

Critical Component: Charting the Sea in Caribbean Poetry

This thesis focuses on the influence of the sea in constructing identity in the writing of Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Dionne Brand. It is particularly interested in examining how these poets trace identity primarily in *The Arrivants*, *Omeros*, and *No Language is Neutral* through their various employments of the sea and liquidity in those works. I then read selections from two of my poetic forbearers from the British Virgin Islands - Alphaeus Norman and Verna Penn Moll - in order to examine the construction of the sea in their poetry against the canonised work of Brathwaite, Walcott, and Brand. I argue through close contextual readings of the selected works that through engagement of various approaches each poet arrives at a portrait of Caribbean identity that is constructed integrally through the fluid, mutable natures of the sea. The five poets are scrutinised in four chapters, in relation to their personal philosophies regarding national or regional identity through essay writings and interviews but more prominently in close readings of their poetry and in particular their representations of the sea. I begin by arguing that in Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1980), the importance of the sea in the various formations of West Indian identity is represented through the exercising of his tidalectic process in his reconstructions of the archetypes of Legba and Ananse, and his ritualising of cricket and calypso. In Walcott's *Omeros* (1990), the sea is presented as the embodiment of history itself through which all of Saint Lucia's contemporary inhabitants must access their ancestral memories. Walcott utilises the Atlantic as a creolising force in his reimagining of the Homeric archetypes of Philoctetes, Achilles,

Hector, and Helen. Brand however, departs from this metaphorical interpretation of the sea and turns inward, redefining the boundaries of land, sea, and sexual desire in Trinidad through a remapping of that island that is focused on the ocean, waterways, and the bodies of women. Lastly, British Virgin Islander poets Alphaeus Osario Norman and Verna Penn Moll embrace different mythic versions of the sea. Norman's work creates a distinct sailor aesthetic that resonates with classic European naval and militaristic poetry as a way to invoke a national pride, while Penn Moll focuses on performances of cultural and communal waterside rituals to frame narratives of local history and village culture. Ultimately, I argue that the sea is presented variously as a portal through which history and tribal memory can be accessed, and as a supernaturally transformative force for the poet.

Creative Component: *Make Us All Islands*

Make Us All Islands is a poetry manuscript based in the British Virgin Islands that explores historical and personal relationships with the sea. The first section revolves around the various arrivals of liberated Africans rescued from slave ships wrecked or captured by the British Navy in the early 1800s. The liberated Africans were not enslaved, but rather forced into indentureship before ultimately being segregated from society and then disappearing from history. The second section is built around the departure of a generation of Tortolan men to work in the sugar plantations of the Dominican Republic at the turn of the following century, alongside other Anglophone Afro-Caribbean migrants. A large portion of these poems are built around accounts of the greatest boating disaster in the islands' history, the loss of a schooner christened *Fancy Me* which wrecked in a hurricane in 1926 off the coast of the Dominican island

Saona. The final movement personalises this exercise and focuses on the poet's interactions with the sea and memory.

Introduction

The stone had skidded arc'd and / bloomed into islands
 --Kamau Brathwaite ('History of the Voice')

for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore / now wriggling on his sandals to walk home
 --Derek Walcott ('Sea Grapes')

this every turn a piece / of blue and earth carrying on, beating, rock and / ocean
 --Dionne Brand ('Hard Against the Soul')

She ran before a raging sea / With neatly shortened sail
 --Alphaeus O. Norman ('Horseshoe's Reefs')

The lashing sea / heaving, giving / islands
 --Verna Penn Moll ('Connections')

The ships and their keels are rooted, / their masts like trees planted in the dense sand.
 --Richard Georges ('Offering')

This thesis argues that the sea operates as a framework for the construction of identity in the work of three Caribbean poets. With the acknowledgement that islands in the geographical archipelago as well as the coastal areas of the Americas hem the Caribbean Sea, it is unsurprising that the ocean is an omnipresent motif in Caribbean poetry. The poets selected in the first three chapters of this discussion are exemplars of both the varying ways that this preoccupation can be explored as well as three distinct poetic and political approaches to the issues surrounding Caribbean identity. The inclusion of the work of Alphaeus Osario Norman, Verna Penn Moll, and myself augments this well-established tradition of mapping the sea through Caribbean poetry. In Anglophone Caribbean poetry, the sea is represented in a variety of ways. At times, the sea bed is focused on as a crypt for the bodies of Africans, Asians, and Europeans created through the transatlantic slave trade, indentureship, or the many wars fought by colonial powers in these waters. The existence of the seafloor as literal crypt and the sea as its liquid barrier then facilitates its metaphorical presence as a vault of lost ancestral memories. Penetrating the marine jailer of these memories and histories necessitates the

conception of the sea also as portal – whose passage through which becomes necessary in order to provide the required raw material for the poets’ reformation of new world identities, or it can suffuse our world in ways that help to reframe historically rigid socio-political perspectives of race, gender, and sexuality. This work analyses how specific works of the poets Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Dionne Brand manifest the sea in the identity quests mapped in their poetry. The texts selected are Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants* (1980), and Brand’s *No Language is Neutral* (1990).

The rationale for selecting these particular poets and these particular works rests immediately on their international reputations, their foundational roles in Caribbean poetry and the contrasting approaches they take towards their representations of the sea in their poetry. Walcott and Brathwaite have and continue to dominate the poetic and literary landscape of the English speaking Caribbean, and are often presented as competing visions of a West Indian poetic aesthetic – Patricia Ismond decides to root the famous controversy in the ‘pronouncement’ by Jamaica-born British writer Edward Lucie-Smith that ‘the West Indies must choose between’ the two writers (Ismond, 1971: 54).¹ I do not intend here to suggest that any such discussion is ignorant or irrelevant, only that any comparison of writers so different in approach and aesthetic is bound to draw attention to those contrasts. Walcott’s aesthetic offers a version of the Caribbean that remains deeply indebted to Eurocentric commitments to art, philosophy, and beauty while Brathwaite is much more concerned with reclaiming the African rhythms of the Caribbean in order to demonstrate that ‘the hurricane does not roar in pentameters’ (Brathwaite, 1984: 313).² In Ismond’s view, within every simplified attitude towards

¹ Ismond does not cite where Lucie-Smith makes this proclamation despite beginning her essay with this revelation.

² Brathwaite’s famous phrase is in reaction to what he sees as the unsuccessful attempts by New World poets like Walt Whitman and Marianne Moore to break from the use of pentameter in

these two poets, there is what she calls ‘a hard core of significance’ (1971: 54), she claims specifically that Brathwaite is seen as a populist figure in West Indian poetry, focused and concerned with and guided by the ‘historical and social themes that define the West Indian dilemma’ (1971: 54). Walcott, on the other hand, appears to be paying ‘passing attention’ to those matters, an image that often does him little good (1971: 54). In sum, Brathwaite is presented as the public poet, especially in his efforts in *The Arrivants* to recreate the experiences and histories of the descendants of enslaved Africans in the New World and Walcott assumes the mantle of the private poet, being first perceived as an artist more concerned with individualistic explorations that operate on an elitist and distinctly European register. The two poets’ differences are often projected into conversations of (nation) language and myth; and while Brathwaite becomes a living synonym for nation language and a poetics rooted in a specific place and space, Walcott interprets English as a banner under which the cultures of empire and colony are unified rather than divided - as he states in *Midsummer* - ‘language never fits geography’ (1982: 19). He illustrates that particular metaphorical perspective later in the same collection³ by painting the image of the English language as a vast green oak under which all speakers of English find shelter. It is perhaps this ambivalent approach of attempting to find commonalities between the Empire and its colonies that helped frame Walcott in opposition to conversations that sought to champion African influences in Caribbean art. Walcott’s critical work, with its repeated recognition of the importance of European forms, provides little ammunition with which to challenge such a conclusion.

order to create rhythms that more accurately captured the expression of life in the environment of the Americas. He says: ‘the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of the hurricane’ (313).

³ ‘LII’, *Midsummer* (1984).

The literary culture and the community of the Caribbean and its preoccupation with the two writers and their perceived contentiousness at times seem insistent on presenting Brathwaite as a figure in possession of a ‘predominantly black’ sense of the Caribbean; a figure in pursuit of a ‘way of thinking’, feeling, and being that is ‘devoid of all the strains and elements of the Western myth’ (Ismond, 1971: 57).⁴ This viewing of Brathwaite as a figure separate and distinct from the Western World and word elides the now well-documented and discussed influence that British American poet and writer T. S. Eliot has on the creation and aesthetics of *The Arrivants* in particular⁵ and Brathwaite’s broader poetic oeuvre in general. Similar projections of Walcott as solely Eurocentric also miss the mark, and underestimate the extent to which he attempts to wrestle with the region’s multi-ethnic and multiracial ancestry. The cast of *Omeros* is largely Afro-Caribbean and in various stages of the same quest to remember or rediscover lost ancestral memories. The fact that those quests are set against the tapestry of Greek mythology and literature serves to acknowledge the multiplicity present in every aspect of Caribbean cultures more so than a derivative repetition of *The Iliad*. Furthermore, if we read Shabine’s famous ending to the first section from Walcott’s ‘The Schooner Flight’, it is clear that the same concerns of identity, place, and belonging that grip Brathwaite’s work appear:

I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.⁶

Ultimately, both Brathwaite and Walcott address their quarrels⁷ (to paraphrase Edward Baugh) with history and ancestry regardless of whether that engagement is

⁴ Brathwaite, especially in *The Arrivants*, is explicitly interested in Western myths given his utilization of Christianity in particular throughout the collection.

⁵ This influence is the focus of Charles Pollard’s *New World Modernisms* (2004), and is explored further in chapter 2.

⁶ *Selected Poems* (2007).

through the ‘public’ and ‘private’ lenses that Ismond articulates. Consistently, these historical quarrels are drawn out against seascapes, most visibly in the waters of the Atlantic during the Middle Passage in both *The Arrivants* and *Omeros*. However, both writers, despite their differences in voice and approach, operate from the heteronormative masculine perspectives of African griot and soothsayer in Brathwaite’s case and noble poetic voyager in the case of Walcott. Dionne Brand’s engagement with the sea through the frame of same sex desire queers this frequently unchallenged heteronormativity of Caribbean literature by imbuing the landscape and seascape with intimate and personal intonations. Similar elements appear in the work of other Caribbean women poets writing after Brathwaite and Walcott, especially the recurring trope of bathing others and washing clothes which introduces a more intimate and domestic register that contrasts dramatically with the epic treatments of the sea and history that are found in *The Arrivants* and *Omeros*. Brand herself is explicitly indebted to both Brathwaite and Walcott for the creation of *No Language is Neutral*. In regards to Brathwaite, his contributions in the arena of the colloquial languages of the West Indies, in particular what he coined ‘nation language’, or ‘the language of slaves and labourers’⁸ find traction in *No Language* where Brand embraces the grammatical structures of Creole for the first time in her published work. With respect to Walcott, the collection itself is titled after a line in the poem ‘LII’ from Walcott’s lesser read *Midsummer*, Brand’s relationship with Trinidad as mapped from and by the sea mirrors Walcott’s own preoccupation with the Atlantic and its own peculiar spiritual and historical relevance to the inhabitants of the Caribbean.

⁷ ‘The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History’. *Small Axe*. 38, 66-74.

⁸ *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984). 5.

With regard to her use of language, Brand does not deploy Creole to signal the particular register of a specific Creole speaker, as Walcott does in ‘The Schooner *Flight*’; rather, she extends Brathwaite’s more generalised use of Creole to insist, as he does, on Creole as an authoritatively poetic mode of literary expression. As Teresa Zackodnik states, ‘[a]s a lesbian of colour, Brand is triply aware of language as a powerful sign that creates and regulates racial, gender, and sexual identities’ (1996: 194). Zackodnik states that ‘Standard English is unnavigable for Brand’ (1996: 195), which is an incredible claim, considering all of Brand’s work leading up to *No Language* is written in it. Regardless of her reading of Brand’s work prior to *No Language*, Zackodnik is cognizant of the ‘insidious’ powers of language, especially those ‘racialized, genderized, and sexualized signifiers’ that simultaneously ‘denigrate and negate her (Brand) as an individual’ (1996: 195). Furthermore, these political aspects of language are not exclusive to the standard European forms, and in reality, while nation languages or Creoles may transcend what Houston A. Baker refers to as the ‘fields of colonizing discourse in order to destroy white male hegemony’ (1986: 382), it often does little to challenge the subjugation of black female bodies within itself and much less for the liberation of lesbian black female bodies. Brand says in the title poem that after her emigration to Canada ‘language / seemed to split in two’ demonstrating the division created within herself, following her own Atlantic crossing, as she becomes aware of both of her otherness and her lack of belonging, while ‘one branch fell silent, [while] the other / argued hotly for going home’ (1990: 28). The juxtaposition of the two demonstrate that it is within the Creole and not the Standard English that Brand finds her voice, yet she still must discover a language that can vocalise her sexual identity. When she discovers that language, she engages the city

anew, celebrating the double disruption her identity creates against the heteronormative society represented in 'x' by the 'city we inhabit like guerrillas' (Brand, 1990: 45).⁹

For Brand, the sea in *No Language* becomes a new way of mapping and identifying the oceanography and geography of Trinidad, essentially remaking it into an environment that is able and willing to house her erotic self. In an interview with Judith Raiskin for *Kenyon Review*, the Caribbean-American writer, Michelle Cliff talks about her desire to write lesbian relationships outside of European contexts in order to demonstrate homosexuality as an integral part of identity and not simply sexual preference. In doing so, she identifies *No Language* as an example of a text that discusses the realities of same sex desire in a largely homophobic society (Raiskin and Cliff, 1993: 58). In the same interview, Cliff speaks of her use of both Standard and 'Jamaican English' in her novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) as a 'double-voiced discourse' (1993: 58), language eerily evocative of Brand's metaphorical treatment of nation language and Standard English as the 'two rivers [that] sentinel the country sand' (Brand, 1990: 22). The sea emerges in the work of these three poets (as well as the lesser known poets Alphaeus Osario Norman and Verna Penn Moll from the British Virgin Islands) as a transformative force through various employments that illustrate its fluidity of meaning and symbolism across Caribbean cultures as well as the compulsion of Caribbean poets to rely on the sea as muse.

The subsequent creative component of this thesis concerns itself similarly with seascapes by exploring narratives in (and out of) the waters of the British Virgin Islands and using the attached histories to sketch a portrait of the cultural identities therein. The creative component is divided into three parts. The first section is inspired by the lesser

⁹ Brand's word choice is no accident, and aside from the suggestion that a resistant subterfuge is necessary to exist as a lesbian in Toronto, the homophonic play against *gorillas* echoes racist stereotypes and the awareness of the white gaze posited by Franz Fanon.

known histories of the liberated Africans (African prisoners seized by the British Navy from captured and wrecked Portuguese and Spanish slavers in the years following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807) and the choices presented to them as the colonial government attempted to figure out their place in the society before the abolition of slavery. The second section is constructed from narratives of the British Virgin Islands in the period of the 1900s to 1930. It is focused on the small agrarian society the BVI had become by then and the connections created with the Dominican Republic when Virgin Islanders began migrating there to work on the suddenly thriving private sugar plantations (Martinez, 1999). Most dramatically, it revisits and relives the devastating tragedy of the schooner *Fancy Me* through the experiences of its survivors as recorded in Janet Smith's *Such Are the Hours to Find Peace* (1998). The final section of the creative component is concerned with how the narratives of loss, survival, and ultimately endurance of the liberated Africans and the survivors of the *Fancy Me* become a sort of process of anamnesis through the relationship of the individual and the sea in the same geographical spaces. These poems examine the intersections of the epic scope of these waves of history when they return to quietly lap at the shores of the personal.

CARIBBEAN LITERATURE AND THE SEA

The ubiquitous presence of the sea as both a natural component of setting and as a theoretical lens or metaphorical device in Caribbean literature will be familiar to the casual reader. Topographically, Caribbean writers cannot avoid the magnetism of the Atlantic as it roars in the background of narratives - literally sculpting the landscape - nor can they ignore its emotional and historical significance as the highway upon which the several large and violent migrations to these islands from Europe, Africa, and Asia

took place (or, admittedly the infinite quieter movements that have continued since). Thus, the wake erupting from those landings still resonates on the shores of the region centuries later when discussing race, culture, politics, and identity. The repercussions of these landings continue to inform both directly and indirectly the writing and criticism from the region. Indeed, the role of the sea in the work of Walcott, Brathwaite, or Brand cannot be fully engaged without an understanding of the historical, cultural, and theoretical concerns that have sprouted from the impact of these migrations.

Because our attention is so easily drawn to those large and painful waves of migration from the times of Columbus to indentureship – and rightly so as these are directly responsible for the perception of the Caribbean’s creolised spaces - what has not been as well scrutinised are the quieter crossings in the smaller sections of the archipelago. These smaller crossings form part of a cycle of migrations that continually reshape and reconstruct identity in these smaller spaces, akin to waves eternally removing and depositing sand on a beach. Just as attentions to sea crossings in the Caribbean are largely concerned with the arrival of the Europeans, the transatlantic slave trade, and the 78 years of Indian indentured labour, much of the literature and criticism of the region (with a few famous exceptions¹⁰) is focused on the larger and more populous islands in the chain. There are therefore gaps in both the spaces within the Caribbean that are explored in poetry as well as in the consideration of the smaller crossings and migrations that either did not occur at all or did not have the same cultural impact in the larger islands. I have chosen consequently to examine a selection of examples of migrations to and from the British Virgin Islands over the past two centuries and the cultural impact those migrations had on the construction of national

¹⁰ Examples of famous writers from smaller islands include Derek Walcott (St. Lucia), Jean Rhys (Dominica), and E. A. Markham (Montserrat).

identities especially through the use of the sea within the work of local poets Alphaeus Osario Norman and Verna Penn Moll.

Before turning to the British Virgin Islands, its history, and its poetry, it is necessary to explore the wider Caribbean context and the social implications of those larger migrations for the region as a whole, as well as how the sea is manifested and how it can be interpreted specifically in *Omeros*, *The Arrivants*, and *No Language is Neutral*. In this introduction, I will consider the critical groundwork laid by scholars Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall in particular as well as the peculiar context of the British Virgin Islands.

THE CARIBBEAN SEA AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Although the sea, in its mutable forms of rage and calm, is frequently invoked and used as a trope in modern Caribbean literature, it has been convincingly theorised and popularly read in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), and Antonio Benitez-Rojo's essay "The Repeating Island" (1985) which predates his later full-length critical work of the same name. Gilroy focuses on shifting the focus of the forced and unforced migrations of the African diaspora from the harbouring points of origin and destination to the open space of the ocean between them. The sea touches multiple spaces simultaneously with its waves - whether those shores are in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, or the Americas – opening a multitude of possibilities and realities in each of these spaces and Gilroy suggests that there is no hierarchy for them to be placed within, instead focusing on the cross-cultural relationships between them. This provides an invaluable resource and an appropriate starting point for this exploration of the sea, the massive forced migrations over it, and its role in the construction of identity in the poetry of my selected poets and myself. Furthermore, Gilroy provides a framework

(while imperfect) that seeks to consider the vastness of the diaspora which I utilise as a point of embarkation to focus more narrowly on experiences that have not been widely vocalised in print and on which there exists a paucity of scholarship. In this regard, I am indebted to the text and I must credit the influence of its examination of routes/roots on my own work.

The impact of *The Black Atlantic* is such that the reverberations still echo in much of the cultural and literary analysis of texts throughout the African diaspora. In particular, the chapter that deals with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and what Gilroy terms ‘the politics of (dis)placement’ holds the greatest influence over my considerations. In it, Gilroy broaches the idea of the curse of homelessness – Walcott’s psychic wound – that is created by slavery in the New World. He argues that such a state of consciousness is reworked in art as a ‘response to the successive displacements, migrations, and journeys’ that have become part of the shared experience of blackness (Gilroy, 1993: 111). The poem therefore becomes the medium through which poets attempt to renovate a New World consciousness with the transformative and mutable sea as one of their chief tools.

Benitez-Rojo takes a similarly aquatic approach to his explorations of the Caribbean’s cultures in “The Repeating Island” (1985). First he approaches the Caribbean through a geographical lens – that is, as the ‘island bridge connecting North to South America’ (1985: 431). He argues that this geographical reality bestows on the region ‘the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction of [...] empty spaces, unstrung voices, ligaments, sutures, voyages of signification’ (431). This approach and the aspects it prioritises (empty spaces, unstrung voices etc.) decentres the critical focus from land and borders despite the essay’s title. Benitez-Rojo explicitly

makes this point and elaborates on the mutability of Caribbean cultures in language that clearly demarcates the differences with the approach that Gilroy will take later on:

The culture of archipelagos is not terrestrial [...] it is fluvial and marine. We're dealing here with a culture of bearings, not of routes; of approximation, not of exactitudes. Here the world of straight lines and angles [...] does not dominate; here rules the fluid world of the curving line. The culture of meta-archipelagos is an eternal return, a detour without destination or milepost, a roundabout that leads nowhere but back home; it is a feedback machine, as is the sea, the wind, the Milky Way, the novel, the natural world, the food chain, the sonata." (1985: 439)

From this reading, Benitez-Rojo dismisses the possibility of a monolithic Pan-Caribbean reality. First, he acknowledges the linguistic dissonances present in the region through its 'saturation' of 'messages sent out in five European languages' (431). This acknowledgement premises the conclusion he comes to later on – that 'there is no Caribbean literature', only literatures emanating from the various linguistic 'blocs' located in the region. In this sense, the sea can be seen as both a physical manifestation and a metaphorical representation of the linguistic barriers between those Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone literatures.

Benitez-Rojo later on in the same essay complicates this initial argument by establishing a fundamental difference held by Caribbean texts regardless of linguistic origin when compared to their European counterparts in particular. He classifies them as 'fugitive' in this regard – Caribbean dramatic structures tend not to conclude with what he describes as 'the phallic orgasm of a climax' (1985: 450). Instead, he posits that Caribbean texts are generally 'non-discursive' and 'circular' and as such, 'the final page

of the text becomes the beginning' (450). This specific claim is clearly illustrated by the conclusions of the texts by Walcott, Brathwaite, and Brand that this thesis examines, as they all conclude by circling back to some form of new beginning and rebirth.

Critical conversations regarding representations of and interactions with the sea abound in wider critical discourse. Christopher Connery broadly discusses the phenomena of 'the oceanic feeling' perceived by the body submerged in the ocean most provocatively through discussions via Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland. Connery describes Freud's interpretation of that feeling as 'a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded' (1996: 289). This feeling is also quantified as 'a survival of an infantile stage', a psychic connection between the sensation of swimming and a life in utero – 'an initial liquid state' (296). Connery's claims then point out that, even for Freud, the ocean is representative not only as 'a journey into the beyond' but also 'a journey back to the source' – whether that source is the aquatic origin of all life or, for the purposes of this thesis, the origins of the modern Caribbean (1996: 293).

The framework supplied by Stuart Hall in his definitions of cultural identity is equally relevant to use as a model to measure the efforts of the poets against. Within this framework, three definitions of identity are offered: identity as the concept of the 'one true self' of shared ancestry and historical experiences; identity as the way we 'position' ourselves within those historical experiences; and identity of 'becoming' which argues for a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multi-racial model of hybridity (Hall, 1990).

The investigation of the three poets contained in this thesis identifies the ways the sea operates within their work as a form of identity construction and then explores the same in the work of the Virgin Islanders Alphaeus Norman and Verna Penn Moll. The processes that the various poets engage in steer us towards certain questions for

each of them: How does the sea inhabit their poetry? Can the influence of the ocean be observed in more subtle ways than as a physical setting or an anthropomorphised force? How much does invocations of the ocean lead the poet towards considerations of history, or does the poet's own immersion into an oceanic past operate as the impetus for a sort of homeostatic relationship between past and present? The sea's liquid nature is appropriately symbolic of some of the difficulties that face an investigation like this. While the poetic experimentations that are attached to this thesis can operate within the fluidities of symbolism and metaphor, the thesis itself attempts to answer these questions within the more rigid confines of academic argument.

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

Chapter one, 'Creolising God: the tidalectic transformations of *The Arrivants*', argues that unlike in *Omeros*, and indeed in Walcott's oeuvre, where the West Indian must re-enter the Atlantic in search of his heritage, the sea instead acts as a portal for African gods to emerge, transformed and complicated in the black New World. I argue that it is this oceanic journey that creolises the gods of West Africa into new incarnations that Brathwaite endeavours to assist the Caribbean citizen to recognise. Brathwaite's sea does not only operate as a symbol of lost memories, ancestors, and identity but as a forge through which his new and torn identities are imperfectly formed. I argue here that despite this difference in direction, both Brathwaite and Walcott invite the construction of parallels with Hall's theorising on identity. I contend that both *The Arrivants* and *Omeros* are concerned with the shared 'oneness' of the Afro-Caribbean experience and therefore attempt to reveal this commonality through their various projections of African rituals and traditions in Caribbean spaces. The two poets also acknowledge that despite this common heritage, the 'blackness' that is constructed in

the Caribbean differs from that ancestral identity. Furthermore, Brathwaite's poetic approach relies on his *tidalectics* theory, an approach that seeks actively to entangle concepts of beginnings and endings, sea and land, old and new, African and European.

Chapter two, 'That gray vault: the sea and history in *Omeros*' examines the sea as the irrepressible force of history in *Omeros*, simultaneously operating as the living vault of humanity's history that cannot be ignored by the new world. The chapter begins by noting that the ocean offers several obstacles to the Atlantic citizen who seeks to access the ancestral memories hidden in it. With reference to Walcott's 'The Sea is History', I argue that the sea, while a museum of memory, acts as both a physical and metaphysical divider for the West Indian from his heritage. Topographically, the ocean's surface contains no static identifiable features. This ephemeral nature means that the traveller cannot use his eyes to chart his route the way he may be able to on land. I argue that Walcott circumvents this obstacle with Achille's dream journey home to Africa across the sea floor. In this passage, Achille and Walcott are able to use this submarine voyage to defy both space and time as Achille returns to the moment his ancestors are captured and sold into slavery, an effort – much like Shabine in 'The Schooner *Flight*' – to tell us how 'this business begin' (Walcott, 2007: 129). Plunkett, Walcott's European parallel to the psychic wound suffered by Achille and literalised in Philoctete, must also wade through history's waters in his research of the island's path and in search of his ancestor. I argue here that Walcott is presenting the sea as an entity of necessary engagement for all New World citizens to reconcile their ancestral memories with their present existences.

Chapter three, 'Dionne Brand and the liquid eroticism of *No Language is Neutral*', examines Brand's engagement with the sea and how she differs in her approach from the first two poets. I argue that Brand's concern is a less communal one,

choosing to employ the sea in a nuanced journey of personal discovery that is occupied and problematized by questions of gender and sexuality that neither Walcott nor Brathwaite have asked. Brand's engagement with a poetics of liquidity also introduces the river as a symbol of feminine sexuality and later the ocean as a muse for the awakening of same-sex desire and ultimately of self-realisation and acceptance. *No Language* also echoes in dialogue with another Walcott work, *Midsummer*, while offering a considerable departure from both the oeuvres of Walcott and Brathwaite in scale, register, and focus. The two men loom over the canon and have been read in opposition for the better part of 45 years, illustrated by the appearance of a 'Walcott or Brathwaite' panel at the Bocas Lit Fest as recently as 2015 which was held at the National Library of Trinidad and Tobago in Port of Spain to celebrate the 85th birthdays of both poets and hosted and feted Walcott in particular who was present. From the emergence of Caribbean literature on the international scene in the 1950s with figures like Sam Selvon and George Lamming, male writers have dominated the formation of the canon and dictated a masculine and heteronormative reality. Only in the 1980s did the emergence of several women writers¹¹ begin to defy this gendering of Caribbean literature, but still the complications and possibilities of other sexualities was largely ignored. Placing *No Language is Neutral* in this context establishes its place as a revolutionary text in the canon as one that not only acknowledges but also actively champions a queer Caribbean reality and a black Caribbean feminist poetics that finds the mutability of the sea at the centre of its aesthetic.

Chapter four, 'Before a Raging Sea: poetry of the British Virgin Islands', takes its title from the poem 'Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*' by Alphaeus Osario Norman, a British Virgin Islander poet whose work I closely examine and a writer who is

¹¹ The likes of Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior, Jamaica Kincaid, Dionne Brand and many others had their first works published in the 1980s.

regrettably not well known or read in the BVI for a number of unfortunate reasons¹².

The preface serves as an introduction to the creative section by summarizing the major historical and cultural realities of the territory and examines how they help contextualize the work of local poets Alphaeus Osario Norman, Sheila Hyndman, Verna Penn Moll, and myself. In this chapter, I argue that the local poets I have selected, in their attempts to wrestle with the idea of a local identity that is distinct from the rest of the Caribbean, are drawn to the sea and the events of BVI history that set it apart from the experiences of the greater region primarily as the way in which they attempt to establish a place for themselves and their islands in the region's consciousness. The size of the islands (the largest island, Tortola, is merely 21.5 square miles), the size of the population (the most recent census estimates a total population of 30,000 in 2010), its geographical proximity to both the United States Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and its tradition of trade with both of those territories, all mean that the sea has truly been an ever-present part of the lives of BVI Islanders and their families (more explicitly so perhaps than the larger Caribbean islands). After the abolition of slavery, the British navy occasionally captured the slave ships of other European nations in the waters of their colonies. In the British Virgin Islands, the African captives who were retrieved from these ships were first housed in barracks and then either conscripted into the British navy or 'apprenticed' for a period of 14 years after which they were considered free (Turnbull, 2012: 17). In the early years of the twentieth century, working class BVI Islanders began to emigrate to the USVI, Cuba, Panama, and the Dominican Republic in particular to find work (O'Neal,

¹² Few of Norman's poems survive despite biographical accounts of his prolificacy. None of his original writings are publicly available, but must be obtained through surviving members of his family. Poems that are publicly available are in government publications that themselves are out of print and difficult to access. Also, the Ministry of Education and Culture has not been a reliable patron of local literature over the years, leading many past small run publications by local authors to become unavailable. With the exception of 'The Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*', the poems in my possession were obtained from his granddaughter Andria Flax (herself a self-published author and poet).

2004: 1). This chapter makes the argument that these specific migrations are peculiar to the British Virgin Islands and are interwoven in any construction of a local identity. I suggest ultimately that for the BVI poet, the current path towards identity must pass through the routes recognised earlier by Walcott, Brathwaite, and Brand as necessary for the Caribbean citizen while attempting to reconcile those memories with the smaller waves of migrations to and from these islands in particular.

The thesis concludes with a critical preface to the creative component *Make Us All Islands* which attempts to articulate the ways in which the exploration of the currents of the sea in the poetry in the critical section continues in my own poetry. The preface also seeks to elaborate on how the poetry interacts with history, the sea, and the oeuvres of the other poets as well as my stylistic choices of form.

Chapter One:

Creolising God: The Tidalectic Transformations of *The Arrivants*

And why do the waves come here
riding from allotted lands

...

After this breach of the sea's balanced

treaty, how will new maps be drafted?
Who will suggest a new tentative frontier?
How will the sky dawn now?

--Edward Kamau Brathwaite ('The Cracked Mother')

The most distinguishing feature of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* trilogy is his sustained commitment to invoking the recollection of ancestral African memory through the creolisation of African and European archetypes in the black New World. Indeed, the glossary at the end of the work begins with a note from the poet about the 'African gods and the Caribbean gods that derive from them' (Brathwaite, 1980: 271). While *The Arrivants* does not undergo these invocations through sustained use of any particular oceanic optics, Brathwaite's theoretical approach is immersed in a methodology that seeks to use the rhythms of the sea's tides to demonstrate the process of creolisation. The act of remembering African gods for example, becomes a proxy for the praxis of reclaiming precolonial identities in their current forms. In particular, the transformations of those gods can be charted from the coasts of Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean, with each shore depositing language, history, and music into the departing waves of influences. Brathwaite's trilogy suggests that the quest for a physical and spiritual return to ancestral memory is vital for the black citizen of the New World as a viable method to regain the fragments of identity lost in an inherited amnesia. This becomes an integral step in the process of reconciling and locating oneself as a Caribbean subject. *The Arrivants* does not attempt to completely formulate what that reconciliation entails, resting instead on the implication of the journey being a fluid,

unending, and ongoing process – a concept that guides the spirit of the text.

Brathwaite's sister, Mary E. Morgan writes of a childhood at the seaside that taught them both 'the importance of breakwaters, of protection against this sea that [they] loved but which could change so easily, so dangerously' (1994: 663). This understanding, she writes, is the embryo that develops into Brathwaite's concept of *tidalectics*¹³ – a method of interpreting life and history through the unending back and forth of the waves of sea. This method is substantively the most vivid and consistent application of the optics of the sea in this work and best encapsulates what Brathwaite is attempting to do in his examination of the fluid interchangeability of African, European, and American archetypes in the Caribbean.

This chapter will demonstrate then that Brathwaite is driven by an application of his tidalectic philosophy whether he is occupied by the charge of retrieving West African deities from the depths of our spiritual memories, recounting the events of a game of cricket in Barbados, or reimagining Caliban as a twentieth century Caribbean citizen. As he ascribes to the spirit of tidalectics, these beings and rituals do not remain stagnant as singular things but instead demonstrate they are as fluid and mutable as the sea itself. The sea then can be read not only as symbolic of those journeys and of the loss of cultural and spiritual memory inflicted by the various forced migrations of people, but also of the unspoken possibilities of future transformations for Caribbean peoples and cultures.

¹³ Brathwaite originally presents this idea as an *alter/native* challenge to the dialectic process during his T. S. Eliot lecture series *Conversations with Caliban* at the University of Kent (1992: 5).

TIDALECTICS AND IDENTITY

The epigraph of this chapter comes from the poem ‘The Cracked Mother’, which appears at the beginning of the ‘Limbo’ section of *Islands* – the third and final chapter of the trilogy. That poem is both one of the better examples of Brathwaite dealing with literal images of the sea as well as a clear representation of his tidalectic poetics. ‘The Cracked Mother’ begins with an invocation of Columbus’ maiden voyage to the Caribbean. Columbus’ ships however, become a nefarious representation of Christianity in the new world:

But on the seas
three nuns appeared
black specks stalked the horizon of my fear
Santa Marias with black silk sails. (Brathwaite, 1980: 180)

As important as religious malevolence, in this image, religion is inextricably wrapped up in the acts of enslavement, genocide, and other atrocities conducted by European states in the New World. Furthermore, this history is bound in both the image of the ship and the seas they sail across to begin these narratives. While this opening section of the poem is located by Brathwaite at Caonoba in the Dominican Republic, the second section begins presumably on African shores as a parental figure, perhaps the continent itself – the cracked mother - speaks:

Saw
what on the water?

Some-
thing floating.

You gave your
beads, you

took
my children

and now I cannot reach
them. (Brathwaite, 1980: 182)

As this voice laments the loss of its orphaned children, the voice shifts to continue the criticism of Christianity suggested in the first section. The sections of this poem perform this criss-crossing of the Atlantic from African shores to Caribbean in an effort to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the narratives that exist on them both as those children are transformed on distant shores.

A working understanding of Brathwaite's tidalectics is necessary then to continue a thorough examination of *The Arrivants* through this lens of transformation. Anna Reckin (2003) provides a helpfully simple definition of tidalectics by describing it as a 'trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis' to which five core characteristics are attributed (2003: 2). First, the movement contained in tidalectics is repetitious and anti-progressive and is not directed towards a finite conclusion in the same way as dialectic reasoning. Second, because of this removal of a conclusive stopping point, tidalectics tends to focus more on the relationships created between the points that the waves of movement travel between rather than a single destination. Third, that focus between the points leads to what Reckin describes as 'the phenomenon of "hearing through" between layers' (2003: 2). This act is epitomised by Brathwaite's later development of the Sycorax video-style which utilises various fonts and font sizes to interrupt and disrupt the reader's interpretation of the text. Reckin makes a neat comparison with this device to the practices of annotation and citation in academic texts:

If annotation and citation can often be seen as devices to restrict the meanings of a text by calling attention to detail...Brathwaite's additions simultaneously particularize and extend. (2003: 2)

Fourth, 'it exhibits the performativity of sound' (Reckin, 2003: 3). Brathwaite's reading of the limbo section of 'Caliban' epitomises the musicality inherent in that poem, but music and portraits of musical instruments inhabit the three sections of *The Arrivants* as

expressions of African identity in the Caribbean. For example, in ‘Wings of a Dove’ from the ‘The Spades’ section of *Rites of Passage* the poem begins in free verse but with a voice that is narrative in structure and tone:

Brother Man the Rasta
man, beard full of lichens
brain full of lice ... (Brathwaite, 1980: 42)

The poem breaks in the middle of words in ways that multiply meaning, but as the poem nears the conclusion of the third stanza, the lines get shorter. As the fourth stanza opens, the lines are essentially whittled down to two syllables and become repetitive, creating a staccato rhythm that brings the solos of jazz saxophonists to mind:

Down down
white
man, con
man, brown
man, down
down full
man, frown-
ing fat
man, that
white black
man that
lives in
the town. (Brathwaite, 1980: 43)

Lastly, tidalectics utilises text and design to produce a fluidity of meaning on the page. As such, Brathwaite’s use of form is extremely focused on breaking and interrupting words on the syllabic level to create variations of meaning and understanding before returning to the word’s original connotation. For example, when Brathwaite delivers the T. S. Eliot Lecture transcribed as ‘Caliban’s Guarden’ (1992) in *Wasafiri*, examples of these interruptions can be seen in the deliberate misspellings of *garden* in the title as well as his use of the word *alter/native* (1992: 4).

The Arrivants is an ambitious trilogy, encompassing a variety of peoples, histories, cultures, languages, and music across oceans, continents, civilisations, and

eras. Brathwaite's use of tidalectics - both as poetic device and as a way of understanding the process of creolisation – becomes his most vibrant application of the sea and its optics in a cohesive manner in this work. As such, most of my attention in this chapter is focused on how this approach seeks to explain the fluidity of Caribbean identities through the transformation of African, American, and European archetypes in the New World.

The construction of Caribbean identity has been investigated and examined comprehensively by a litany of critics over the past five decades. Stuart Hall, having provided perhaps the most emphatic contributions to this area of study, contributes two competing approaches to identity that he examines in 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' (1993) that remain particularly useful for evaluating Brathwaite's efforts in *The Arrivants*. The first definition of cultural identity Hall presents is the concept of the 'one true self' hidden within various other artificial and inflicted selves that people with a common ancestry and heritage share. Caribbean identity then, under this definition, is concerned with shared historical experiences that provide a 'oneness' to the Caribbean experience operating beneath multiple layers of 'superficial differences' (Hall, 1993: 223). This sameness, it is suggested, can be disinterred and represented to remind us of our true selves.

He then attributes this understanding of identity to both Pan-Africanists and the poets of the Negritude movement and to many other post-colonial movements. This understanding is characterised by a working toward a rediscovery of that identity of oneness hidden beneath the surface of colonial conditioning. This is the point at which Hall, branching off from Frantz Fanon's 1952 tome *Black Skin, White Masks*, questions how much the *rediscovery* of identity becomes an act of *invention* through a 're-telling' of history. This imagining of an African past in particular operates as the vehicle

through which the oneness of blackness can be reconstructed and juxtaposed against the fragmentation and disenfranchisement we have been taught to accept as a prerequisite to understanding ourselves (Hall, 1993). For some critics, this is the lens through which Brathwaite's trilogy is best viewed.

The second understanding that Hall examines is the definition that is most appropriate to my investigations, the idea that despite this common experience of history, the many differences between us also play a part in establishing as he terms it 'what we have become' (1993: 225). Caribbean identity therefore has as much to do with what we are *becoming* as what we are. It is not something that is statically anchored unaffected by time and history or place and culture, but rather, something that is immersed in the never-ending waves of influence emanating from innumerable locations. While these identities possess history and histories, they are not lying dormant to be excavated and displayed or rediscovered in the terms of the first view. Instead, Hall describes identity as being ever-changing, 'subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power' that needs to be understood through the context of *positioning*¹⁴ (1993: 225). Specifically, identity refers to the ways we have positioned or have been positioned 'within the narratives of the past' (1993: 225). More specific to our needs is the second position of this definition, in that it is precisely the presence of a multitude of differences that establishes the uniqueness of the Caribbean. Hall suggests thinking of the region as being measured against two axes. The first measures similarity and continuity, while the second concerns difference and rupture. At once we notice that while the process of violent migration that brought the Afro-Caribbean's ancestors to the region is a shared experience, that in itself was an act of rupture and discontinuity.

¹⁴ Hall's use of the term is in response to Ernesto Laclau and his dislocation concept. Essentially, Laclau argues that society is ever being de-centered or dislocated by exterior forces. This process of dislocation manufactures new social divisions from which subject positions or identities are created (Hall, 1996: 600).

While this was the African experience, at the end of slavery the process was repeated with some degrees of similarity in Asian indentureship. The Africans who arrived on these shores however, as is well known, in no way represented a homogenous group with differences in culture, tribal affiliation, language, and religion.¹⁵ Ironically, and perhaps cruelly, it is their passage across the sea and enslavement that subsequently dissolves these differences and begins to create the oneness the first approach seeks to reclaim. This understanding most closely aligns itself with Brathwaite's tidalectics as a fluid and ongoing process of making and unmaking which is continually presented throughout the trilogy.

The third position of what I will call Hall's *identity of becoming* considers the three presences that coexist to construct a Caribbean cultural identity. He identifies the Presence Africaine, Presence Européenne, and the Presence Americana – here signifying the components of what would eventually constitute an idea of a New World cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic model of hybridity. This approach has inherent limitations – most especially in its exclusion of the presence of the indigenous peoples of the region – but retains some utility for the purpose of exploring how hybridity necessarily fosters the adaptation of cultures in new spaces. Hall argues that Presence Africaine, although repressed, is in fact omnipresent. It permeates the language, folk traditions, music, food, and religious practices of every post-slavery society. However, the fusions and hybrids in which a new Africa survives must not be confused by the desire to retrace our route to rediscover the old. As Hall states simply, the 'original 'Africa' is no longer there' (1993: 231). The Africa we must search for instead is the

¹⁵ As noted by Aribidesi A Usman (2008) among many others, 'Africans enslaved in the New World were brought from different societies with varied cultural, linguistic, political, and religious traditions' (130).

Africa as it is in the New World. This is precisely the exercise that Brathwaite engages in through his examination of West African gods reimagined in the new world.

CRICKET AND JAZZ: TIDALECTIC MODELS

Brathwaite's foray into cricket poetry in *Islands* philosophically mirrors those movements, and it is useful to begin our examination of how the tidalectic model works here. As Claire Westall points out, Brathwaite's poem 'Rites' 'addresses the legacy of slavery directly and exposes the region's mid-century limbo position between colonialism and independence' (2011: 146). Stewart Brown, in his anthology of cricket-themed essays and creative writing *The Bowling Was Superfine* (2012), argues that that poem is 'the best-known literary account of a West Indian cricket match' (28) and celebrates the nuanced manner in which Brathwaite addresses issues of not just race, class, and equality, but also the socio-political balancing of ambition and trepidation in matters of independence (29).

The poem begins with its speaker bantering with a tailor in his shop about an informal game of cricket between friends on Brown's Beach in Barbados. The littoral setting of the match and its framing of the conversation that ensues acts as a gestural acknowledgement of the tidalectic properties of cricket in the Caribbean region. Furthermore, beginning in this manner – the English game being played on the sands of a Caribbean beach – metaphorically recreates the images and narratives of European New World arrival. What has been transformed at this point is the identity of the performers of the game. Perhaps also, this switch problematizes questions of ownership and belonging in cultural terms. As such, the conversation with the tailor quickly becomes an examination of the traditional English game being adopted and internalised as West Indian culture in a way that at first suggests a dialectic discourse between the

two. The language that the two men use to talk about the men who were playing the game is rhythmic and musical in a way that at first seems incongruous with what is supposed to be the game of upper class English gentlemen:

O!’
 Hoppy was bowlin’ that day
 as if he was hurricane father.

 Lambert went in, play-
 in’ he know all about it as us’al
 an’ *swoosh!* there he go fan-

 nin’ outside the off-stump an’
 is *click!*
 he snick

 de ball straight into de slips.
 ‘Well boys it look like we lossin’
 this match’, says the skipper, (Brathwaite, 1980: 197)

It appears that the English game has been appropriated by the speakers, who serve here as representatives of Barbadians specifically and West Indians generally, and made part of the culture in a manner similar to the way that English language has been adopted and adapted. In this sense, cricket can be seen to operate as another of the empire’s exports – an implement of assimilation. However, the form that cricket takes on Brown’s beach and later in the Oval is a deviation from its upper class English origins. The poem skilfully navigates the spaces between English and Caribbean shores, as well as the ways the game becomes ‘an arena for the acting out of deeply felt animosities’ (Brown, 2012: 24) towards the English and their colonial history. As the poem continues, the reader realises that the casual game the customer has started talking about is a distraction, and the match at the Kensington Oval between English and Barbadian teams that the tailor has seen is another important narrative of value. It therefore operates as a metaphor for tidalectics, a back and forth trading of meaning and power by the empire and colony without any neat conclusive end in sight – much like

the never-ending rushing and receding of waves on the beach. Brathwaite utilises a heavy dose of humour in the transition between the games with the tailor's lyrical rebuke of the customer for their ignorance of the events in the game of larger importance:

You mean to say that you come
in here wid dat lime-skin cone

that you callin' a hat
pun you head, an' them slip slop shoe strap

on to you foot like a touris';
you sprawl you ass

all over my chair widdout ask-
in' me please leave nor licence,

...

'fore Christmas; an' on top
o' all this, you could wine up de nerve to stop

me cool cool cool in de middle
o' all me needle

an' t'read; make me prick me hand in me haste;
an' tell me broad an' bole to me face

THAT YOU DOAN REALLY KNOW WHA' HAPPEN
at Kensington Oval? (1980: 199)

The fluidity with which the game is transformed is displayed linguistically as the natural language of the game has ceased to be Standard English and becomes Creole. While in England the game may be the entertainment of the middle and upper classes, in Barbados the preoccupation clearly extends to the working class tailor. In this sense, the game has been connaturalised – adopted and adapted in a way that is 'natural' to the new tropical environment. Doubly relevant, is what exactly happened at the Oval and why that game is so clearly more important to the tailor than the friendly game on Brown's beach. The match at the Oval is a game between an English county cricket club

and a Barbados team featuring the legendary trio of Barbadian cricketers Frank Worrell, Everton Weekes, and Clyde Walcott. The import of the match becomes evident with the dichotomies that appear immediately: black versus white; work versus wealth; colony versus colonial power. As Elaine Savory writes:

‘[c]ricket is a crucial part of Barbadian and West Indian culture, a game which the English brought as their own imperial expression in sports, but which was turned into an opportunity to literally beat them at their own game by West Indian players, and thus became an iconic part of anti-colonial politics, especially since black working class boys could enter this sport and dominate it’ (2007: 247).

The tailor’s emotion and disdain of the customer’s ignorance is tied intimately to the reverential regard the three W’s (Worrell, Weekes, and Walcott) are held within Barbadian cricket lore as well as the other stark juxtapositions the poem is making. Firstly, by virtue of the poem’s title, Brathwaite is elevating the game of cricket from an entertaining pastime to a religious ritual – the three W’s representative of the Holy Trinity – and, within the game itself, there is a moral rite of passage which possesses transformative power over its participants and spectators – be they black or white, English or Afro-Caribbean. The tailor informs both the customer and the reader that ‘this isn’t no time for playin’ / the fool nor makin’ no sports; this is cricket!’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 198). As Clyde Walcott strikes a ball towards the boundary for four runs, the spectators in Bridgetown’s Kensington Oval react as though they are engaged in the same struggle for power that the players themselves are engaged in, ‘[a]ll over the groun’ fellers shakin’ hands wid each other // as if was *they* wheelin’ de willow / as if was *them* had the power’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 200). The crowd appear to be going through a religious catharsis and begin to revere Walcott as a god. At this point, the tailor describes a field invasion where a sacrifice is offered up - ‘one man run out pun de field wid a red fowl cock ... would’a give Clyde right then an’ right there / if a police hadn’t stop ‘e!’ that is quickly followed by the deeply emotional and ironically

humorous scene of the Post Office clerk who literally screams for English blood to be shed (Brathwaite, 1980: 201). The crowd's emotional oscillation when the team is in control, between the hero worship of the physical power of the West Indian batsman and the demand for metaphorical violence as recompense for the sins of the English, juxtaposes two responses to the systemic emasculations and exploitations performed by slavery - namely imbuing Afro-Caribbean bodies with power, and demanding retribution for the crimes of colonisation. This oscillation in the narrator's view implies an inability to settle on which response is appropriate, but the eternal back and forth of the game prevents any neat finality or closure.

The game, operating effectively as a metaphor of the fluctuation between the two sides, turns on the tailor's line 'when things goin' good, you cahn touch / we; but let murder start an' you cahn fine a man to hole up de side' (Brathwaite, 1980: 201). Cricket as it is presented in 'Rites' truly then represents a ritualised limbo for both colonised and coloniser. Firstly, power in the game is never static or stationary, moving dynamically/tidalectically back and forth between the two sides playing with it.

This trading of power - best symbolised by the Englishman Wardle taking the previously mighty Clyde Walcott's wicket and thereby silencing the euphoric crowd - serves to confuse to whom the game and its rules, its language, poetry, and power truly belong. Still, it is a simple affair to read 'Rites' as the West Indies versus England. The texts cannot be read as either Eurocentric or Afrocentric as either choice would ignore the complexities of Brathwaite's work in both style and content, turning it into what reaches the slur of an afrocentrism that functions as a revisionist racial therapy as opposed to a valuable creative work that possesses its own merit. This poem is demonstrative of Brathwaite's tidalectics in the way that it transforms the English game into a sort of ritual resistance that finds its resonance in the bodies and minds of black

and brown peoples in the Caribbean. As the ball goes back and forth between the wickets, with a certain relentless inevitability, so does the political struggle between European colonial power and Caribbean colonised state. Thus, despite the sea's seeming tangential appearance at the poem's opening, the ocean plays an essential role in describing and understanding the sort of movements that the ball, the politics, and the poem itself makes.

Who then, does the game of cricket belong to? To whom does Caribbean poetry belong? Despite the perpetual journey towards the reclamation of ancient memories from the depths of the Atlantic, it is important that we remember Brathwaite's admission that Europe cannot completely or genuinely be excised from the foundations of West Indian identity¹⁶ – even one that is unambiguously Afro-Caribbean at its root – nor would that be a responsible act as there are no longer clear demarcations between the two. The positioning that Hall describes as a way of navigating the mutable arenas of history, culture, and power reverberates with Brathwaite's tidalectics as a necessarily fluid approach that disregards the rigid structure of the dialectic method. It would therefore be productive to recognise the undercurrents of Western poets, religion, and cultural tradition in Brathwaite's poetry. As a matter of fact, Brathwaite has for many years been vocal about his admiration of T.S. Eliot¹⁷ and attributes the embrace of nation language in Caribbean poetry in part to Eliot's influence in the region:

What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot. And you can see how the Caribbean poets introduced here have been influenced by him, although they

¹⁶ In Brathwaite's *History of the Voice* (1984), he describes the submergence of imported languages within Creole English in the Caribbean which in turn influence the speaking of English (13).

¹⁷ In addition to his own admission, a number of critics have examined Eliot's influence on Brathwaite's work. While that is not the preeminent focus of this dissertation, Charles Pollard's *New World Modernisms* (2004) was utilized more extensively than the myriad other scholars available (like Neil ten Kortenaar (1996)) because of his inclusion of Walcott.

eventually went on to create their own environmental expression.
(Brathwaite, 1992: 286-287).

So then, if Brathwaite is inspired by and invocative of Eliot's *Wasteland* (1922) in his design of *The Arrivants*, does the text then somehow become less African or Afrocentric? Or does Eliot's own reliance on jazz rhythms and tones in the poetry that is so admired by Brathwaite demonstrate that the Caribbean poet has discovered yet another – if convoluted – route back to blackness in the New World? The challenge to the text's Africanness, following Hall, must be rejected, as it is within the Caribbean that Brathwaite rediscovers what it means to be African. However, with the eagerness that both Eliot and Brathwaite engage the use of jazz rhythms,¹⁸ it is clear that those cadences do indeed arm both poets with a more globally inclusive perspective. Günter Lenz (2003), in his analysis of Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama*, describes jazz and the jazz aesthetic as '[giving] voice to a rhythm of life that offers a subversive [...] alternative to the "standardization" of white urbanized, industrialized America' (270). For both Eliot and Brathwaite, this subversive counternarrative proves attractive in their respective works. For the modernist Eliot, jazz becomes part of a method of accessing rhythms that are closer to natural speech and song, while for the modern Brathwaite it provides a clear departure from the Eurocentric aesthetic and enables him to discover more *alter/native* approaches. Brathwaite can then depart the shores of Africa, brushing against the many beaches of the Atlantic (the east coast of America as well as the west coast of Africa) in a manner reflective of his own theory – the constant to and fro of the ocean's currents.

Pollard sets up three pillars against which Eliot, Brathwaite, and Walcott may be measured and compared - the poet as the bearer of tradition, the poet's use of language,

¹⁸ This commonality extends even to the point of attempting to articulate a critical theory based on those rhythms for the West Indian novel in Brathwaite's case.

and the poet's role as a public figure. While these concepts are indubitably valuable instruments of measurement of consonance between the three men, and also echo one of the distinctions made by Ismond between Walcott and Brathwaite, Pollard belittles the differences between the two West Indians by explicitly ignoring cultural politics to focus on unearthing a shared modernist legacy housed in their inheritance of Eliot's aesthetic (2004: 221). Interestingly, he points out that Brathwaite and Walcott select distinctly different moments from Eliot's career in which to find inspiration. Thus, despite the efforts of the author to present the two writers as complementary members of a modernist ideology, and indeed Pollard's distrust of cultural and national politics and their impact on postcolonial criticism in the West Indies, he characterises their work as appropriations of Eliot towards divergent ends – Brathwaite develops his 'insurgent Afro-Caribbean folk tradition' while Walcott later moves towards a 'New World classicism' steeped in irony (2004: 52). In characterising their work in this manner while projecting Eliot as their preeminent poetic muse, Pollard leaves little room to consider Walcott and Brathwaite as modernists in their own right, an omission that may leave a reader to perceive both as abstract derivatives of Eliot.

SUBMERGED GODS: TIDALECTIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Several sections of *The Arrivants* trilogy concern themselves with the telling, retelling, and the creation of myths surrounding various West African gods, Caribbean cultural archetypes, and literary characters. Through their deployment, Brathwaite conflates some deities and reimagines others in ways that suggest an attempt to reframe them all in ways that are recognisable to New World citizens. For Ayo Kehinde (2007), Brathwaite is exercising the search for the one true identity referenced by Hall by challenging the intrusions the past has made on the psyche of the New World citizen. In

his essay exploring this repeated search in *The Arrivants*, he argues that the act creates disquiet or anxiety that compels the poet to address the past in order to achieve wholeness. Kehinde here appears to be seduced by the approach that Hall seeks to move away from, as his reference to wholeness suggests that the West Indian, being unanchored in his own history, is in need of rediscovering some missing fragment or broken piece that can act as an anchor or rooting device to complete the puzzle of his true identity. The discovery of the fragment then offers at first the mirage of the possibility of completeness, of a reputable finale to the identity quest. But this is an almost too perfect reading of Brathwaite which requires us to ignore the many other registers at play in *The Arrivants*.

As the enslaved Africans of the Americas and the Caribbean were forcibly removed from the ancestral home, their exile violently and permanently removed what Kole Omotoso referred to as ‘the revitalizing effect of their home culture’ (qtd. In Kehinde, 2007: 183). He suggests that this ability to look towards home while in the exile of the New World is what sustained European colonists throughout colonial history. Kehinde also suggests that by the nature of their arrival, the Indo-Caribbean citizen retains the ability to look back to their spiritual origins in a way that the Afro-Caribbean cannot. If looking back or reclaiming spiritual origins in the manner that Omotoso suggests results in similar problematic relationships, it would seem that that categorically precludes West Indianness altogether for the Indo-Caribbean subject. Similarly, such approaches also exclude West Indians of European, Chinese, or indigenous heritage.

Thus, that first wound of separation from what Omotoso terms as a ‘home culture’ is present, although to varying degrees, for all diasporic peoples in the Caribbean. Recognising this history partially destabilises just how much the notion of

India can be viewed as a contemporary ideal for the children of indentureship, while also serving to unhinge approaches that omit or silence alternative experiences from considerations of Caribbean identity. Omotoso's point that East Indian indentureship was not as devastatingly debilitating as slavery, while it has some basis in the material history of both oppressive institutions, risks implying a rather reductive quantitative approach to suffering.¹⁹ It is also worth acknowledging here that, due to the restricted word-limit, this thesis does not engage with the literature available about that other Atlantic crossing, the *kala pani*.²⁰

The second wound is the denigration and reduction of the qualities of African history, culture, and civilisation. These wounds are at the heart of the loss of identity commonly felt by Afro-Caribbean subjects. Africa must be reclaimed in order for those two wounds to begin to heal. The continent therefore becomes a central figure in need of reclamation in Brathwaite's journeys both in life and art. In his art at least, the method of repossession occurs in the rhythmic episodes of life, music, food, culture, and history contained in *The Arrivants* that attempt to reveal the traces of African identity for the West Indian to find in himself. Brathwaite's exercise in raising to the surface the memories of a submerged psyche implies that their original forms are unattainable as exact replicas. This reading may constitute a tacit rereading of Kehinde as the segmented memories Brathwaite presents then chart routes to identity through various points in a present Caribbean consciousness and not solely in exhumed artefacts.

John Thieme (2003), instead points towards Brathwaite's doctoral thesis as evidence of his working from a creolisation model, but we need not delve into Brathwaite's doctoral work to find evidence of creolisation in his tidalectic approach

¹⁹ Benarasidas Chaturvedi, an anti-indentureship figure in India, estimated that 'one-fifth of all returnees from plantation colonies became stranded in Calcutta' (qtd in Mohabir 2014).

²⁰ The *kala pani* refers to the taboo of crossing the sea, an act which carried with it the loss of varna status.

when it is evident in *The Arrivants* trilogy itself. In *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (1998), Laurence Breiner points out that in *Masks* - the first part of the trilogy – Brathwaite repossesses and transfigures iterations of his central character Tom into an ‘Old Negro Noah’, a Moses, and finally a sort of prophetic Adam from the archetypal protagonist of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s well-known abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).

It is necessary then, to proceed along the routes that *The Arrivants* maps for two distinct purposes. First, to scrutinise the non-Caribbean archetypes Brathwaite has adopted in the trilogy against how he has repeatedly transformed them by way of the Atlantic and the Middle Passage for the purpose of his narratives. Secondly, to ascertain how, where, and hopefully why along the way we leave the explicit review of the Caribbean’s African past and foundation to find at the end of the work the dawn rising over ‘shattered homes’ where the West Indian can now make ‘with their // rhythms some- / thing torn // and new’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 270).²¹

If we can look at parts of *The Arrivants* as plumbing the depths of African ancestral memories in the Caribbean and emerging with the mythic identities of West African deities that have been fused and transformed into new versions of themselves, then we can also look at the process of those transformations as being illustrative of Brathwaite’s discourse on tidalectics – in the manner the West African gods contain Judeo-Christian elements while reflecting the realities of slavery, racism, and exile in their contemporary Caribbean / New World surroundings. The conclusion of the trilogy is also a sort of anti-ending if not completely a rebirth of Caribbean identity. The manner in which Brathwaite incorporates the various voices of Africa alongside

²¹ This concluding line is reminiscent of American poet Ezra Pound’s slogan for modernism and imagist poetry - ‘Make It New!’. This may then construe *The Arrivants* as a Caribbean homage to modernism.

techniques that are unapologetically influenced by transplanted American poets strongly connected with modernism betrays the fluid nature of his poetics and a clear refusal to remain stoically, and solidly, rooted in the past.

In beginning an examination of the archetypes employed and repurposed by Brathwaite in *The Arrivants*, we should first insist on a rejection of any colouring of the trilogy as atavistic. Instead, as Thieme argues, the structures that the text engages with are fluctuating and fluid and we ‘are forced [...] to engage in discursive dialogue with Western metanarratives such as Christianity and capitalism’ (2003: 28). Thieme chooses here to examine the poems that reconstruct Anansi, Ogun, Legba, and even Caliban, often through a revisited Uncle Tom. But utility can also be found in exploring or discovering the Judeo-Christian facades of the Tom character as Noah, Moses, and Adam in Laurence Breiner’s assessments. This is not an exhaustive list of the black models present in Brathwaite’s opus, but instead the figures that lend themselves best to the reconstructive purpose outlined. For my own purposes, I will focus on the first four archetypes. Each of the archetypes presented in the trilogy contains overt and covert religious connections. In the case of the West African gods, while their spiritual implications are expected, Brathwaite’s commitment to the tidalectic process means that he often extracts them from or projects Judeo-Christians myths on to them. In the case of Caliban and Uncle Tom, as they embody multiple identities, histories, and mythologies they become avatars for the tidalectic process – being neither fully Old nor New World citizens but something new, fluid, and different.

The first two West African gods – Anansi and Ogun - appear in the New World in conclusion of the trilogy *Islands*. Anansi is conceivably the best known West African deity for Caribbean audiences and appears as the archetypical spider and mischief maker, sitting in the dusty corners of the houses of the poor where ‘their brooms cannot

reach' in the poem 'Ananse' in the final volume *Islands* while concurrently displaying his power of chaos threading the moon and 'moonlight stories' alike (Brathwaite, 1980: 166). As in the Yoruba myths, the gods descended to earth on spider-webs, and here Anansi 'sits with the dust, desert's rainfall of soot, / plotting a new fall from heaven' (Brathwaite, 1980: 166). It is a suitable image for Brathwaite's purposes as possibly out of all the West African gods at his disposal, it is Anansi who retains the most vibrancy, relevance, and power in the New World and continues to spin his spider-webs to operate as passages for the trafficking of gods. This is juxtaposed with his common cultural place in the Caribbean as the protagonist and teller of tales. Thieme argues that Brathwaite is then *elevating* Anansi from the cunning spider spinning tales back to his rightful place as a god. However, considering Brathwaite's bold allusion to Lucifer and fallen angels with Anansi 'plotting a new fall from heaven' (1980: 166), his Anansi figure assimilates the Judeo-Christian myth alongside his Yoruba origin, implying that he simultaneously embodies the fluctuating histories, myths, and identities of the Caribbean.

It is important to note that according to the glossary appended to *The Arrivants*, while the full extent of his creator-god powers has been lost, the spider sits just outside the reach of not only the brooms of the poor, but 'on the tips // of our language' (Brathwaite, 1980: 272) and at the outskirts of our memories. Christopher Vecsey's portrait of the spider 'The Exception Who Proves the Rules: Ananse the Akan Trickster' (1981), colours Anansi in all his forms as a functional paradox – a storyteller who records and sustains cultural traditions while in the body of the stories he tells he is a rebel whose irreverence allows us to laugh at the constructed solemnity of those same traditions. He posits that in the tales, Anansi's usual goal is to draw closer to the sky God Nyame more in order to receive wealth and accolades than through any love for

him, but between seeking the hand of Nyame's daughter and winning the rights to all stories, the spider's defiance and arrogance ultimately leads to him usurping Nyame's dominance over death.

At this point, Anansi begins to represent a spirit of rebellion for the Akan people to enjoy. Vecsey stops short of suggesting that the enjoyment to be gleaned goes any deeper than the humour of the lowly and their triumph over the powerful, indeed the trickster often suffers for his actions whether by the loss of the proposed marriage to Nyame's daughter, or his loss of water, or suffering the blight of sores for his insolence (1981: 170). But the trickster also inspires a spirit of resistance while operating in the 'eye corner of ghosts' (Brathwaite, 1980: 165) when he comes to the New World. His willingness however to undergo humiliations and punishments of considerable severity is well reflected in those who are able to hear his drumming named in 'Ananse' as black leaders of revolts and revolutions in the Caribbean - Tacky and Toussaint L'Ouverture²² (Brathwaite, 1980: 165).

Starting with the first section of *Rights of Passage*, 'Work Song Blues' the Uncle Tom character takes his central position in the narratives of *The Arrivants*. He is presented here as being a revitalised and reimagined version of the submissive and loyal noble savage, replacing him with a much more human, melancholy figure (Brathwaite, 1980). While this revision maintains the language of Christianity in his frequent prayers throughout the text, the character's spirituality is complicated by the integration of Ogun and other African forces. In the opening poem 'Prelude', the speaker begins what seems an orthodox Christian prayer in structure and language to protect his progeny:

So grant, God

²² Tacky would be recognised by Caribbean historians as the Ashanti chieftain who along with Queen Nanny led a rebellion of enslaved people in Jamaica in 1760, while Toussaint L'Ouverture was the leader of the 1791 slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue (modern day Haiti) before later establishing the constitution that declared Haiti autonomous in 1801.

that this house will stand
 the four winds
 the seasons' alterations
 the explorations of the worm. (1980: 7)

The speaker continues to pray for protection from thieves and assassins yet it is after praying for 'warm fires, good / wives and grateful children' that the prayer begins to turn from God to the flame and iron in its praise – it turns to Ogun (Brathwaite, 1980: 8). Mirroring Anansi's straddling of insect and god, champion and liar, the Afro-Caribbean citizen here blends together the dichotomous streams of African and European religious traditions.

Tom's connection to what Brathwaite is searching for in *Rights of Passage* is less tenuous than that described for the contemporary Afro-Caribbean in *Islands*, remembering not only the language with which to offer his prayers but the physical spaces and routes of his history and ancestors that brought him here evidenced by his referencing of the three West African cities: Kano, Bamako, and Gao. This element creates in the Tom archetype a patriarch who is at once a counter to the North American invective that his name has become – he is not yet resigned to the loss of name and respect that will come later.

If Anansi serves as the drumming inspiration, the ideas that catalyse the actions of figures like Tacky and L'Ouverture, then Ogun encapsulates the spiritual language of resistance. Being the god of iron, fire, and war, when Ogun is invoked again through Tom in 'Anvil' we see the anger boiling under the surface of the wood-carver as he decides against a violent opposition to the source of his oppression. Such action would reduce him 'to be a beast', or act as a complete removal of his humanity, which 'was the least he wanted' (Brathwaite, 1980: 65). But, it is precisely his inaction that is interpreted as submission, his pragmatic nonviolence that becomes representative of a

stupidity and cowardice which his descendants ridicule him for – a depressing image when juxtaposed against the power of Ogun in the various Yoruba myths.

Ogun's recession in 'Work Song Blues' begins with the realisation of Tom's fears in 'New World A-Comin'' - that New World blacks have become a leaderless, rudderless people. This leads to Tom's prayer at the end of 'Tom' that his 'children's eyes / will learn // not green alone / not Africa alone' (Brathwaite, 1980: 16). When the voice that appears in 'All God's Chillun' speaks, it is to insult Tom with the slur 'nuncle', at once removing any social authority that his title may have once affirmed. More importantly, after lamenting the conditions in which they are forced to live, the speaker talks about past African glories suggesting that at this moment, memory has not yet deteriorated, amnesia is yet to set in: 'we kept / our state on golden stools – remember?' (Brathwaite, 1980: 18). At first a question and secondly an imperative, the family hierarchy has been overturned and the elder is now the one being instructed and reminded. Tom acknowledges the accuracy of the memory, but while his voice has grown progressively Christian throughout these first few poems, when he is challenged by the memorial of the golden greatness of Africa he questions the usefulness of memory when his own mock him and his condition (Brathwaite, 1980: 18).

Maria Casas chooses in 'The African, His Masculinity, and Herstory: Intersections of Race and Gender in E. K. Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*' (2005) to interpret this rejection of Tom by his progeny as the moment that separates New World African from their birthright. The shaming and emasculation of 'timid Tom' is entangled with the shame and powerlessness of slavery. This inability to connect themselves to the Ashanti golden stool of memory is tied directly to the hesitation for the Afro-Caribbean man to '[reclaim] Tom and [his] (shamed) past' (Casas, 2005: 7). If

Tom is the figure of creolisation that links the New World African to his spiritual ancestry, he operates as a gate which can either bar or grant access to it.

When 'The Spades' opens, the memories that Tom and the persona of 'All God's Chillun' debate are immediately reduced to ethereal smoke that cannot nourish or sustain. The language of 'Prelude' suggest a further emasculation, as the memories cannot offer the perceptible physical currency of the body – 'lips we can't kiss / hands we can't hold / will never be enough for us' (Brathwaite, 1980: 28). This passage contains a material sexual quality that suggests the vitiation of black male power but also that labour has replaced it: 'for we have learned / to live with sun / with sin / with soil / with rock / with iron / toil' (Brathwaite, 1980: 28). Tom's prayers now appear to be for nought and his fears realised.

Brathwaite's devotions to Legba continue this motif of emasculation as the gatekeeper of worlds, man's intermediary to the divine becomes a lame old man in rags. Legba's crippling and transformation from celestial to powerless mirrors the debilitation of Ogun and the depowering of Ananse, yet he still offers his gift of transportation as a keeper of memory. Legba appears in *Islands*, a forgotten old man who holds nothing but memory having 'fought in the last war' throughout south East Asia. While his service to the empire awards him 'ribbons' commemorating his fighting, he only receives 'a small pension' and 'not very much attention' once he has returned. While history has transformed and forgotten him, history also operates nefariously when his children variously 'eat dirt' or 'go to school to the head- / master's cries, // read a black- / board of words, angles, // lies' (Brathwaite, 1980: 174). Those 'lies' serve to allow them only to 'hobble' into careers in 'banks, books, insurance businesses' and a psychological variation of the lameness physically exhibited in the beginning of the poem. The options suggested remain bleak. Either the New World black languishes in poverty or literally

back-breaking labour forever physically subjugated to work that is not his own, or he is left to pursue the alternative which relies on a complicity with the newer forms of colonialism that reinforce the same condition and psychological injuries.

Interestingly, the loss of memory of Legba's true place is clearly ours, as members of his suffering descendants. The loss does not have to be permanent however, as Brathwaite then attempts to repossess that memory and restore dignity in recognising the 'old man on a crutch' as god coming to church before later reincarnating him and presenting him to us as a god in rags still clutching 'his crutch and satchel / of dreams' (1980: 266). The beat of the poem shifts once that wound has been acknowledged and the rhythmic opening of 'And black black black / the black birds clack' calls to mind both the cadence of percussion or chanting, and the language of resistance and nationalism. Thus, the poem suggests a rebirth of sorts for Legba here from the crippled remains of an African god to something new and different.

Legba's reduction to this state begins in his crossing of the Atlantic. It is telling that the sighting of the 'lame old man' is in church – a centre and symbol of the overarching reach of colonialism on an oppressed people with a repressed spirituality. Legba begins in Dahomey as the keeper of the spiritual gateways, his beauty and virility adored, but in Haiti and the New World he becomes the gnarled and elderly peasant – the beautiful god now broken and left a ruin by centuries of slavery. Even in this weakened state, Brathwaite writes that 'the gods still have their places;' they can mirror Achille's journey and 'walk up out of the sea / into our houses;' and so they do (1980: 190). Legba reclaims his own place through the Vodou hymn Action Legba in 'Wake'. The poem itself is a rite of passage, of the journey from life to death, and as the speaker implores the newly departed spirit to commune with their 'never-returning ancestors' and share news of the suffering of their children. There is a trace of resentment in the

words, perhaps a shadow of abandonment ‘that now they have left us / the land is unbearably dry’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 209). It is fitting then that the god who embodies the creative force of the world in Dahomey, so often symbolised by the phallus in the past, is the name invoked to open the gates and show the way for both soul and mourner. The forgotten old man then, the victim of history – Tom – becomes a vessel for Legba to inhabit in the New World. In Vodou, as the intermediary, possession by Legba is what opens the gate for possession by the others. Brathwaite’s use of the Vodou hymn can then serve as an incantation for himself to be mounted and used as a poetic ewer through which these gods may find a new life along with jazz and reggae.

With Ananse, Ogun, and Legba, Brathwaite reclaims what appear to be the hollowed out husks of the African legacy in the Caribbean and revitalises them through both the poetry itself and the reimagining of their spirits both within and against the force of history. These husks are then plunged into the waters of the Atlantic when he imagines them transposed into the New World archetype of Tom and the Spades – Brathwaite also does not seem averse to pulling elements from other areas of the creolised experience of the Caribbean, specifically Catholicism.

BAN BAN CA-CALIBAN HAS A NEW MASTER

Thieme recognises the action of remembering and re-envisioning archetypes and points out the transformation of another archetype, this time Shakespeare’s Caliban, as a departure in the sense that, akin to Walcott’s characters in *Omeros*, it begins with a model canonised by European literature and not Yoruba, Vodun, or Ashanti religions. Further, the poem ‘Caliban’ is perhaps the most representative of Brathwaite’s tidalectic approach. In taking Shakespeare’s character and repurposing him as a voice speaking to the place of the Caribbean citizen in the New World, Brathwaite is able to raise a

critical lens not just to the colonial masters in Europe, but also to the dangers of embracing or entertaining the United States as a replacement for them – effectively widening the conversations he has started with Tom to complete the three fold movement he describes in ‘Caliban’s Guarden’ (1992) in *Wasafiri*.²³ In that lecture, Brathwaite focuses intensely on Shakespeare and his play *The Tempest* in particular, seeking to suggest a ‘wider’ utility to the character of Caliban. The poet further argues that the European consciousness that sanctions the creation of the slave trade and the violence that births plantocracy is derived from an ‘alteration of consciousness’ that occurs the moment Columbus’ ships sail into the Caribbean (Brathwaite, 1992: 3). He proposes this altered state theory as the reason why Europeans living in the Caribbean during colonialism return to Europe only to consider it alien to their sensibilities. Brathwaite argues that this *alterRenaissance*²⁴ is the legacy that Caliban inherits from Prospero, a language of materialism that repeatedly justifies his own slavery. With this reading, Brathwaite explains Caliban’s tendency to seek a new master rather than his own freedom when plotting against Prospero and makes his cries of freedom at the end of the scene cruelly ironic (Shakespeare, 1998, 2.2). Caliban is undoubtedly made by Brathwaite to represent the plight of New World peoples, simultaneously containing a multitude of histories within himself while under the rule and subjugation of colonial power.

Brathwaite reframes the entire play with this understanding. Prospero he marks as the master, Miranda the daughter of the revolution, and Ariel as the personification of Prospero’s technology or magic. Brathwaite then identifies a litany of personas and

²³ That lecture was transcribed from the first talk in a series of T. S. Eliot lectures entitled ‘Conversations with Caliban’ that Brathwaite delivered at the University of Kent. His spelling of ‘guarden’ is deliberate. (‘Guarden’ 2)

²⁴ *AlterRenaissance* is the term that Brathwaite settles on in this lecture to name this altered consciousness. He argues that the creators of the Renaissance would not have conceptualized ‘that celebration of Mammon’ that creates and endorses the institution of slavery.

personalities that are effectively various versions of Prospero's prisoners²⁵ before landing on what he refers to as 'the one hope, the one growing point' (1992: 4), which is the people who espouse the *alter/native* as a substitute to the rebellion against the social authority that Prospero represents. This approach argues for restoration as a sort of cosmological restoration of a lost identity – represented specifically here in Caliban's mother Sycorax. He refers to Sycorax as a 'submerged' element of Shakespeare's play and a vital component to restructuring what he refers to as 'our own inherited psychology' in order to 'nativise' a people to a place that does not house its 'native sounds' (1992: 4). Sycorax' submersion in the text is another feature of tidalectics, she operates beneath the surface and absent from the present, yet her influences are deposited in the genes, memories, and motivations of Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero.

In the poem of the same name, Brathwaite transforms the memory of Caliban of drunken slave to social recorder and commentator. The tone of Caliban's lyric 'Caliban/ Has a new master' (1987, 2.2. 179-180) in *The Tempest* becomes sombre and elegiac in the submission that the post-independence Caribbean has simply traded British imperialism for American capitalism. Intriguingly, as 'the Chrysler stirs but does not produce cotton', this new master seems unable to create anything of worth (Brathwaite, 1980: 191). Instead of the 'screaming sugar-cane' and the plantocracy of the past, corrupt police fleece casinos while Caliban raises the mirror to society calling upon it to 'salute blackjack, salute backgammon' (Brathwaite, 1980: 191). The portrait of the new master is so stark that Brathwaite's Caliban is caught in the absurdity of having to choose between the two. If Prospero represents imperialism and the cruelty of colonialism while Stephano offers the drunken madness of capitalism, the only freedom

²⁵ Among the prisoners, Brathwaite lists Tom, Friday, Tacky, Caliban, and Ananse (1992: 3). A gallery of African archetypes in the new world which for him symbolise various degrees of resistance to colonial systems of power.

to be found for Caliban is his immediate escape to Carnival – a masque-like celebration of freedom creolised from African, French, and Spanish roots.

Caliban is nonetheless utilised to lament the loss of his island and autonomy, as his history has been reframed and possessed by another. While Ariel serves Shakespeare's notion of the good slave, thankful for the improvement of his terms of vassalage, Caliban revolts in word and deed. Indeed the opening lines of their respective first appearances illustrate the philosophical difference of the characters' attitudes towards their enslavement. Ariel approaches submissively, eager to serve the pleasures of his master, whether that be for him 'to fly,/ To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride/ On the curled clouds' (Shakespeare, 1.2.190-2). Ariel's docility and domesticity is also framed in his enthusiasm to laud and reaffirm Prospero's mastership of not just Ariel, but the island as well. In this sense, he reacts to subjugation by turning to the use of the master's rhetoric in an attempt to placate the master's temper and solidify his position as good slave. Simultaneously, Ariel symbolises Prospero's dominion over and subjugation of the island and nature itself.

Caliban also turns to the master's language, but to curse – the one benefit he counts from being forced to learn it. The curse also mocks Prospero's ability to lend power to words while simultaneously summoning the memory of his mother Sycorax and her control of powers similar to that which Prospero wields. Caliban's agitations are quelled by Prospero through various spells – at times performed by Ariel- with a vindictiveness that is arguably violently disproportionate to the offence committed. Aside from Prospero's early threat to Ariel to re-imprison him, the only other mention of Sycorax – the island's original owner – comes when Caliban reveals that the dynamic that greets the reader in the first Act is not how it always was. Caliban recounts a

familiar tale of subjugation and force used to seize the land that is rightfully his, as he was his ‘own king’ and is now prisoner.

This particular element has an intriguing resonance with Gilroy’s observations of certain black sometime sailors in *The Black Atlantic*. In particular, the biracial radical Jamaicans William Davidson and Robert Wedderburn – both progeny of white English aristocrats and black Jamaican women – who utilised their knowledge of the sea to move ‘between nations, crossing borders’ in ships that also operated as ‘micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity’ (Gilroy, 1993: 12). Notably, Davidson essentially acts out the story of Caliban in his attempt to assassinate the British Cabinet as part of the Cato Street Conspiracy in 1819.

Whereas Ariel has the promise of freedom to lend fervour to his duties, Caliban has no hope of an end to his bondage and as such cannot summon any other response besides rebellion. For Brathwaite, that rebellion embraces the creolisation experience represented by both Carnival and pan music before channelling limbo and the physical performance of Afro-Caribbean dance as both an escape from and a response to the false choices he has earlier been presented. The performance of the limbo dance in the third part of the poem then becomes a sort of spiritual or therapeutic exercise as the stick Caliban dances under begins to represent slavery and the Middle Passage as the dancer descends imploring the reader to ‘*limbo like me*’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 194). The stick’s symbolism fluctuates from silence and darkness, indicative both of the loss of the ability to speak and the darkness of the ship’s hold, to the plantation whip – both images of the pain inflicted by slavery on the bodies, psyches, and memories of New World Calibans. As the stick is transfigured into a drumstick however, Caliban discovers the complete escape from his bondage to Prospero’s colonial power in embracing the creative rhythms of the drums and the dance. As Pollard notes, the dance under the

oppressive stick acts as an allegory that symbolically expunges or unmakes the memory of the Middle Passage in order to unearth ‘an identity that lies beyond the silence and darkness of slavery’ (2004: 72). In fact, as the persona of Caliban rises on the other side of the limbo stick - having been pulled by the call of the drum and the drummers - he is bathed in sunlight and so comes ‘out of the dark’ into the presence of the ‘dumb gods’ who then ‘raise him up’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 195) to save him from the torment of history, thus reconnecting him to Legba and those other reclaimed gods whom Brathwaite has reframed and reimagined.

This reclamation of the old dead gods from the bottom of the Atlantic is provocatively mirrored against Christian images in ‘Eating the Dead’. The poet, earlier invokes a seminal moment in both the New Testament and a Shakespearean trope from *Hamlet* with the image and sound of the cock’s crowing ‘creak[ing] the darkness open’ (Brathwaite, 1980: 219) an allusion both to Peter’s denial of Christ and the Ghost’s fear of the coming sunrise meant to banish wandering spirits back to purgatory. In the Gospel of John, after Jesus is arrested and taken to a high priest’s house, Peter had to wait outside the doors of the courtyard to be let in. Once inside, he denies Jesus three times. Brathwaite knocks on those doors, and instead of admitting Peter, he admits Brother Spider/Anansi for his speed and ‘enduring cunning’ and then admits ‘the iron stranger / Ogun’ and Damballa – ‘a god of the highway’ according to the glossary (Brathwaite, 1980: 272). This substitution enables the ritual sacrifice of flesh, ‘time, ruins, relics’ to begin the journey necessary for the possession in the following chapter (Brathwaite, 1980: 220). What results for Brathwaite is a fluid retelling of Christian myths in which dwelling places are found for this curated pantheon of archetypal West African figures.

The second part of the poem transposes the horror of the black experience in the New World with symbolic imagery of Christianity beginning with the crucifixion. The knocking of the black door and the crowing of the cock are onomatopoeic cues before Christ's crucifixion, but in his place hang the bodies of slaves as 'resurrections' to be 'stripped from the wings of trees' (Brathwaite, 1980: 220) and pierced with bayonets in place of the Holy Lance before Brathwaite concludes by echoing the rite of communion in the final lines of the poem where the speaker taunts the religious establishment with his ability to show their flock 'what it means to eat / your god [and] drink his explosions of power' (1980: 221). This subversion of the Christ figure as now a figure of black suffering in the New World is foreshadowed ominously by the figure of Tom in the early parts of *Rights of Passage*. Returning to the fourth part of 'All God's Chillun', Tom is mocked and goaded by his children as a Moses figure they implore to 'get to hell out'a Pharoah's land!' (Brathwaite, 1980: 21). The refusal to follow Moses to salvation is together ironic and depressing and followed immediately by Tom's appeals to God for clarity: 'What harsh logic / guides their story? // When release / from further journey?' (1980: 21). Tom's heartbreak is clear as the image of him as Moses, elderly shepherd without a flock, and later an avatar of Anansi and Legba.

We see then that Brathwaite's efforts in reconstructing the Africa that we have lost from the vestiges that remain in the New World citizen's consciousness results in visages that are no longer solely African in their various cultural, historical, and spiritual constructions. After their voyage over sea and time, the figures that rise to take their place offer up a myriad of contradictions and internal oppositions to wit spider/god, Uncle Tom/Moses, or Akan/Christian that more truthfully hint at the coexistence of the various realities and experiences present in the psyche of the Caribbean.

Chapter Two:

‘That gray vault’: The Sea and History in *Omeros*

Where are your monuments, your battles, your martyrs?
 Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
 in that gray vault. The sea.
 --Derek Walcott (‘The Sea is History’)

The frequency with which images of the sea are littered throughout Walcott’s poetry is not surprising given the ubiquity of the ocean in small island life. *Omeros* (1990), Derek Walcott’s tribute to seaside life in the Saint Lucian fishing village of Gros Ilet relies heavily on the sights and sounds of the sea and the shore to place or anchor the text. I choose here to differentiate between anchoring and rooting. Rooting as a trope, cements identity to physical and tangible space and place – trees are rooted in earth – with little lead or room for flexibility or movement within that space. The image of the anchor is tied literally and figuratively to Paul Gilroy’s use of ships in *The Black Atlantic*. In that text, Gilroy sketches the image of a sailing ship to communicate several of his key ideas. Most importantly for his arguments, a ship contains a microcosmic society that is necessarily insular from the outside environment regardless of the national boundaries it crosses, while simultaneously recalling the nature, history, and politics of the arrival of blacks to the West. In Gilroy’s own words, the ship is ‘a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion’ which focuses readers’ attention on ‘the middle passage, [and] on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland’ (1993: 4).

While the anchor secures itself on the seabed, the lead it gives the ship in the water allows it to float and move flexibly in the fluidity of space and place provided by the sea. It is this flexibility that allows the West Indian poet to float between the continents and his archipelago to attempt to sketch the region’s mutable identities. The

anchor's connection to the ship metaphor invokes a routed approach to exploring these various identities that may provide an important distinction from attempting to tie them down to land or islands.

The utility of the sea in *Omeros* however, or rather, the particular utility that I am most interested in for the purposes of this study is its predilection for separation – its ability to isolate. This is a distinct trait when placed in the setting of the Caribbean, as islands by nature are physically isolated by the sea's presence and given their small mass, in a more dramatic and insulated fashion than the separation experienced by the inhabitants of the continents. This feature is of noteworthy interest to Walcott, and he uses it often to communicate the loss of or disconnection to history that the characters in Gros Islet feel. The histories of these characters originate across the Atlantic – a body that at once physically separates them from West Africa and England but also spiritually maintains that distance from the identifying qualities of those places. The characters also demonstrate that they have different relationships to and concepts of history, identity, and their connection to a shared past and their common location – a truth that suggests that Walcott shares Hall's insistence on the 'critical points of deep and significant difference' which constitute 'what we really are' (Hall, 1990: 225).

Walcott has previously explored the ocean's relationship with the past in the poem 'The Sea is History' (2007: 137). In it, the sea is at times chaotic and elemental and at others a living vault of man's history in the new world. It is the stoic grey jailer of our monuments, battles, martyrs, and tribal memory at one moment and a beast whose 'foaming, rabid maw' consumes Port Royal with a tidal wave in the other. This particular poem however, alongside its biblical allusions and forced coincidences, attempts to depict the sea in the Caribbean as enabling a 'real beginning' of history.

This sentiment is in keeping with the Adamic philosophy and his many allusions to the biblical book of Genesis that the poet espouses in both his poetry and plays.

In the first chapter of his book *Topographies* (1995), J. Hillis Miller argues that ‘[e]very narrative, without exception, [...] traces out in its course an arrangement of places, dwellings, and rooms joined by paths or roads’ (10). This routeing becomes a knotted and complicated process when applied to *Omeros*. The various rooms, dwellings, and places are mostly located in Saint Lucia except for the narrator’s exploits in Europe and North America and Achille’s spirit journey back to Africa. Insofar as topography is a detailed description of a place or an examination of its surface features, Miller’s premise fails to completely comprehend the total influence the sea carries. As the features of the sea in any one location are ephemeral, the desire to give a detailed description of a location on the sea’s surface is not accommodated by its reality. To describe this environment then, we must first observe features that are distinguishable and notable by their similarity or difference to features elsewhere. The ocean’s surface is mutable, and rarely does a location provide a topographical feature distinguishable enough to locate it as a setting different to elsewhere.

However, there are two ways that this complication is unravelled. First, during his spirit journey in Book Three, Achille simply walks across the ocean floor thus satisfying the inclination to see and describe topographical features. Specifically, Achille can see and describe coral reefs, shipwrecks, and other marks that help to locate him in the Caribbean Sea. Secondly, the problem dissipates if we look at the sea as topography working as the path or road traced by Miller. If the sea’s primary topographical function is as a route between terrestrial locations then the mutability of its surface is a moot point. Routes guiding people and cargo in this manner have been established for millennia, and as mapping technologies like nautical charting, global

positioning, and environmental observations eliminate inefficiencies ocean journeys become quicker and safer. The ocean routes to the New World are traversed in *Omeros* by the characters' European and African ancestors by boat, and later by Achille on foot. The mapping of the seafloor as traversed by Achille in *Omeros* becomes more and more sophisticated with the use of sonar, revealing with great frequency the locations of sunken ships and other historical debris thought lost. The marriage of these two topographies – the seabed and its surface – suffuses Walcott's text.

I will demonstrate that the primary role of the sea in *Omeros* is as a physical and spiritual disconnector or isolator of the West Indian from his history. To accomplish this, I will first observe the ways that the sea is presented in the narratives of Philoctete, Achille, and Plunkett. It is then necessary to examine the poet's understanding of history, the sea, and anchorage and attempt to calibrate these against Walcott's larger search for a Caribbean identity.

The sea in *Omeros* indeed acts as both scenic backdrop and as an elemental chaotic force throughout the poem. Its beauty strikes the poet in moments when he pauses the narrative to admire 'the bay's cobalt' and 'its stunning width and hue' (Walcott, 1990: 298). The sea's elemental power meanwhile becomes evident for example in its role in the death of Midshipman Plunkett, a nineteen year old ancestor of Plunkett's who happens to be serving in 1782 on *The Marlborough* under Sir George Rodney at The Battle of the Saints against the Comte de Grasse and the French. Below deck as his ship is rammed by the *Ville de Paris*, Plunkett is attempting to regain the deck when 'another huge wave poured through / the hole' (1990: 86). This scene, and Plunkett's floundering in the 'whirlpool of debris' before 'the next wave sent / him against his own sword' (86), is illustrative of man's inability to corral, control, or elude the power of the ocean.

With the multitude of histories and narratives operating in *Omeros*, it becomes clearer that it is the sea that *Omeros* is anchored in and not any particular history.

Anchoring the text in the sea allows for both a literal and figurative fluidity that can be accounted for in the ebb and flow of the non-linear narratives as well as the fluid or at least ambiguous connections that Walcott is able to make between the characters and their individual histories, before he draws lines back to their present realities.

The sea enters the text as provider of the village's industry in the first lines as Philoctete and the men cut down trees to build their canoes. For Philoctete, the trees are no longer trees, but canoes (Walcott, 1990: 1). The act of cutting down the trees stirs the theme of dispossession that the poem develops as the trees are referred to as 'old gods' being uprooted, killed, and replaced by 'a single God' skyward. The uprooted old gods however, are the vessels that provide the fishermen with their livelihoods as well as their connections to the land and sea worlds – and in Achille's case, the world of his ancestors. However, instead of melancholy, the logs felled for the canoes 'gathered that thirst // for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with'. Instead of grieving, the trees are eager to become canoes, eager to find their repurposed use on the water. More importantly, the old gods become the vessels that allow us to remain connected despite the force of severance that the sea represents. This passage in particular echoes Brathwaite's repurposing of the African gods in *The Arrivants* in their new roles as the lame grizzled veteran coming to church or the seething and resilient wood-carver²⁶.

The sea, which Philoctete admits, 'that feed us fishermen all our life' is the force that authorises their murder of the trees despite their stature as 'old gods' in order to provide a living for the fishermen of Gros Islet (Walcott, 1990: 1). Its ubiquity is figuratively denoted as it pervades the various environments of the narrative: in the

²⁶ See 'Anvil' (Brathwaite, 1980: 65), and 'Tizzic' (1980: 262).

forest, the sound of the wind in the ferns immediately invokes the sound of waves crashing for the fishermen before they begin their axework; it is also present in the framing of Philoctete's revelation of his wound - his scar has been created by a rusty anchor and his lamentation while rolling his trouser leg up is compared to 'the rising moan / / of a conch' (Walcott, 1990: 4); even the wound itself, admittedly the central trope of the work, is illustrated with the imagery of the ocean as having 'puckered like the corolla / of a sea-urchin'; following this, the sea affirms its place as an elemental amnesic force when the fishermen's canoes 'agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees' (Walcott, 1990: 8). It is my contention then, that although wounds may be the central trope of the work, the sea pervades every aspect of it as the necessary environment for the text as well as the central operative for Walcott's musings on history, identity, and place. The sea frames the discussions as the wounds—whether amnesic or physical—suffered by Philoctete, Achille, and Plunkett are all rooted in the living on, crossings of, and dying in it.

In *Omeros* at least, the sea consistently involves wounding of some sort. Figuratively, the psychic wounds suffered by Philoctete, Achille, and Major Plunkett can be directly tied to the history that the sea has swallowed and separated them from, and these wounds are only healed after each of these men traverses that history in various ways, allowing them to come to terms with the displacement that they have each experienced. Literally, wounds from the sea are suffered by Philoctete – by the anchor – and by Plunkett's nineteen-year-old ancestor Midshipman Plunkett. The young sailor is robbed of his noble death under Rodney's command after being rammed by the *Ville de Paris*, when successive waves eventually impale him on his own sword (Walcott, 1990: 86). Plunkett's impalement illustrates the self-inflicted psychic trauma of slavery on the colonial power, a physical representation of the guilt that must follow great sin. This

oceanic wounding that echoes the wound that afflicts Philoctete implies not only the shared cultural history of Euro-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean citizens but also points to similarities in their contemporary psychological states.

Stephanie Boeninger posits that the metaphorical use of the sea by postcolonial poets in general is tied to ideas of ‘fluidity’ (2011: 463). She suggests that in order to construct a unified identity, the Caribbean poet must simultaneously assert and erase individual identities in order to find a ‘common ground’. Even that common ground is to be distrusted and questioned as she argues, quoting Bhabha, that shared identity appears ‘with other categories and divisions’ (Boeninger, 2011: 464). The multitude of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups present in the region necessarily problematises any attempt to house them all under one coherent identity, and makes definitive categorisation impossible. The path we will take through Hall and Brathwaite demonstrates as much, and Boeninger agrees, conceding that the ‘ground’ we seek is really liquid, fluctuating constantly. In the end, all paths retrace the voyage or sea crossings that brought them to land – to this ground – in the first place.

Considering this, perhaps a more critical expedition would be an exploration of the numerous routes and combinations of routes that help form the aggregation of identities present in the region. With this in mind, the felled trees turned canoes are an appropriate image for Walcott to begin with as the heritages that were lost in the text were established from the decks and bellies of the ships that brought the characters and their ancestors to the island. That scene in *Omeros* gracefully juxtaposes the ‘roots’ that Caribbean people seek to find as well as the ‘routes’ that brought their ancestors to these islands. As Paul Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic*:

It should be emphasized that ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood

for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. (1993: 16)

Boeninger's search for 'common ground' is tied to what Gilroy describes as the stronger interest 'in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness' as opposed to considering the formation of identity as process-based and malleable as is suggested through the use of 'routes' (Gilroy, 1993: 19).

If this common ground exists, it must be in the condition of the people who inhabit the space in the present and not in their diverse originations. Boeninger, for example, juxtaposes what she characterises as the positive presentation of the sea in *Omeros* against David Dabydeen's poem 'Turner' – a study of J.M.W. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship* (1840)²⁷ in which a slaver is depicted sailing through heaving seas leaving the scattered remains of slaves in its wake. Boeninger suggests that while both poets seek to frame the sea as a transformative force – for Walcott to create a new 'shared cultural consciousness' – Dabydeen focuses 'more intently on the formation of individual subjectivity' (2011: 463). This approach seems a reductive reading of Walcott, as the place of Plunkett's character cannot be explained away with the same interpretation of the Atlantic even if it performs the same amnesic role of the erasure of the stained past for the European as it does the African – a repressed or disowned memory that nevertheless influences the actions of both. Instead, *Omeros* must be understood as an examination of both the shared consciousness of Caribbean communities and the individual's awareness of their own desire to find their place within it.

²⁷ Turner was inspired by reports of the massacre of 142 enslaved Africans on the slave ship *Zong* in 1781. The same events have inspired works by Caribbean authors such as Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) as well as M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008).

Regardless, the sea is an apt metaphor for the poet's pondering of identity and history. The fluidity mentioned earlier is one of the benefits of the pervasiveness of Walcott's sea. Despite the various wounds exhibited by the three characters and their diverse origins, tracing both the roots of those wounds and their cures across the Atlantic allows him to expose the ocean as a tool for history's erasure.

The sea's erasure of the region's particular past allows the region's inhabitants a kind of amnesia which becomes a fundamental element on which Walcott's Adamic philosophy of Crusoe²⁸ and view of the Caribbean is based. The unpublished script of Walcott's *The Isle Is Full of Noises*²⁹ is the first obvious appearance of the Philoctetes myth in the poet's work. The parallel drawn from the Greek figure to Crusoe is one of isolation and abandonment on their respective islands – ultimately our introduction to the shipwrecked condition that the poet speaks of later. The character of Sir Lionel in the play also answers to Crusoe and lives on Pigeon Island in an exile enforced by his stinking boil. As Paul Breslin observes, Sir Lionel 'the statesman has become a fisherman, like Philoctete and his colleagues Achille and Hector in *Omeros*' (2001: 247). The Adamic theme of naming is also introduced in this play as the character James takes a Yoruba name after obtaining Sir Lionel's spear gun.³⁰

After James' death, Sir Lionel gives a eulogy that focuses on the connection of person to place without the psychological preoccupations of history, culture, or class. For Breslin, this speech aspires to Walcott's Adamic ideal of the dawn and newness offered by the erasure of history's inhibitions. The English ambassador to Barbados in

²⁸ These two concepts recur in both Walcott's poetry and prose, and in his essay 'The Muse of History', he celebrates 'the great poets of the New World' who escape the magnetic pull of history in order to become 'capable of enormous wonder', as if born anew in a new world (1998: 38). This is similar to the experience of Crusoe, attempting to build something new from the shipwrecked position he finds himself.

²⁹ This play was produced in the United States in the early 1980s but has not been published or produced since.

³⁰ The speargun in the play appears to be a representation of the bow of Heracles that Odysseus brings back to the island of Chryse to end the Trojan War in *The Iliad*.

the play, Sir Geoffrey Thwaite refers to the smell of Sir Lionel's boil as 'the stench of a dying past' suggesting that as Sir Lionel is cured, that the 'death' of that past is complete, allowing James' eulogy to be filled with newness and possibility.

With this text in mind as we read *Omeros*, we can begin to map the figures of Philoctete, Adam, and Crusoe as attempts to address the split from history that Sir Lionel accuses the Atlantic of forming. Sir Lionel decrees prophetically that 'unless we can join these halves we aren't yet born' (qtd in Breslin, 2001). The three figures then become routes to fuse past and present, Old World and New, Mediterranean and Caribbean. The fissures between these various parts are visible through the various traumas and wounds exhibited not only by the characters, but also by the political corruption displayed in the play, and the inability of the inhabitants of the islands to forget the ocean as a cemetery of memory littered with the bones of their ancestors. In his baptism of James in the prologue of *The Isle Is Full of Noises*, Sir Lionel asserts through a conceit of slavery that 'their bones are like chains // hanging round your neck, // and the future is a whole // burden in itself' (qtd in Breslin, 2001).

This is the double-edged sword of amnesia that Walcott posits. For all of the characters afflicted by the violence of the past, their wounds can only be healed when they are confronted by and through memory. This strategy offers the afflicted the benefit of amnesia as a way of conquering that psychic trauma or at least offers the opportunity for catharsis in moving past the trauma that that past represents. The three figures can be seen as two transitions. Philoctete and his festering wound represent the incessant suffering from the violence and memory of slavery while the moment he is healed, he can then become the Adamic character that Crusoe is. In that moment, he is no longer chained to the scars of his past and is released to rename and recreate the landscape and his connection to it as he sees fit.

In his interview with George B. Handley, published in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, Walcott engages the old misguided refrain of the Caribbean being a place without history (2005: 131). Being the view of James A. Froude more than a century ago in *The English in the West Indies*,³¹ this statement can hardly be seen as a genuinely intellectual provocation in the current century. It ignores the destruction of the history and culture of pre-Columbian peoples who inhabited the region by the arrival and colonisation of the Caribbean by the English and other European nations.³² History from the period beginning with the colonisation of the Caribbean in the fifteenth century until the beginnings of independence midway through the twentieth is also largely dictated and controlled by European voices and interests. If there is any veracity in Froude's statement then, a great degree of culpability must be laid at the feet of his countrymen. A clearer picture of the author's intent however can be gleaned from a selection from the same text:

They [blacks] knew their own deficiencies, and would infinitely prefer a wise English ruler to any constitution which could be offered them. If left entirely to themselves, they would, in a generation or two relapse into savages; there are two alternatives before not Grenada only, but all the English West Indies—either an English administration pure and simple like the East Indian, or a falling eventually into a state like that of Hayti, where they eat the babies, and no white man can own a yard of land. (Froude, 1888: 78)

Clearly, Froude's conclusions are as misguided as the wilful misconceptions that are fuelled by his racism. His perceptions and evaluations of African history and civilisation is likewise clouded by prejudice as he concludes variously that blacks 'like most

³¹ Despite the age of Froude's text, it remained one of the incitements for Edward Baugh to pen his famous essay 'The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History', suggesting that such perceptions and attitudes toward the region persisted into the 1970s.

³² However, as a statement of provocation, it has inspired (and continues to inspire) a staunch critical response from historians, artists, and writers.

Asiatics, do not desire liberty, and prosper best when they are led and guided' and that 'generation has followed generation [of African blacks], and the children are as like their father as the successive generations of apes' (Froude, 1888: 69).

The history of the region that Froude seeks to deny is one of displacement, slavery, and indentured labour. In this circumstance, Walcott has usually argued instead that it creates opportunities for new beginnings as opposed to desolation. Rajeev Patke argues that this perspective leads Walcott to explore 'how the Caribbean might be renewed in the fictions of poetry' (2006: 215). One of the first steps in this renewal however, is the acknowledgement of the sea's role in wiping away the connections to the origins of Antillean people. In the Handley interview, Walcott quite explicitly invokes the sea as an amnesic force in his Crusoe metaphor³³. In his view, the lack of a single history³⁴ of the Caribbean means that its people are able to embrace the opportunity to reject, destroy, unmake, undo, and rediscover ways of seeing and experiencing themselves and the spaces in which they live. Peering through this lens, Froude's provocation regarding the absence of history begins to crumble, the New World that Walcott visualises in its place is instead one inundated or saturated by history. Ironically, the blind regurgitation of Froude's insult ignores the host of histories present because the preponderance of histories present blinds him to their singular existences.

Walcott argues that this New World 'has no memorials [or] architectural promises in it' (Handley, 2005: 134). This creates a distinctly 'Caribbean experience' which is shared with the Robinson Crusoe character—a 'shipwrecked condition' (134).

³³ 'The Argument of the Outboard Motor' (134), and in the Crusoe poems in *The Castaway* (1965) present Crusoe as a Caribbean Adam '[c]razed by [the] paradisaic calm' (55). In 'Crusoe's Island' the sea repeatedly confuses and astounds: it is 'a blinding shield' (55), the speaker is in fear '[o]f being swallowed by blue' (55), the mind 'disintegrates in water' (56), his son's head is 'lolling in foam' (56).

³⁴ Instead, the region can be described as possessing an aggregation of competing African, European, and Asian heritages of ethnicity, culture, and education.

This 'legacy of erasure' provokes Crusoe's excited response, the creation of a new beginning. History, for Crusoe in Walcott's words, is no longer 'a consequential thing' (Handley, 2005: 134). The removal of consequence³⁵ in the larger picture allows for Walcott to reject what he refers to as 'the romanticised, pastoral vision of Africa that many black people hold' (Walcott, 1996: 18) while simultaneously offering a perspective on Europe and language that does not originate from a combative or antagonistic sentiment.

If then, history is either forgotten, non-consequential, or fluid in its connection to the present place, then Walcott is free to create what Patke refers to as a 'poetic amnesia' (2006: 213) – a disconnection from the physical history of the place which allows him to cast lines of inspiration from Saint Lucia to Homer and the Caribbean to the Aegean. Having removed the cultural specificity of *The Iliad* and its anchors in the Mediterranean, Walcott transplants the themes and characters in Saint Lucian bodies. The resulting concatenation of disparate spaces and histories begins to work in a sort of forced animation. The poet himself has detracted from the desire to view the work as a simple juxtaposition of Homer's narratives with the diasporic aporia that the island's residents wrestle with. While Hector and Achille have to be considerably modified to compile more than just their namesakes in order to make Omeros' story arc work, Philoctete is possibly the most successful adaptation.

Philoctetes transforms from wounded and abandoned archer to wounded foam-haired fisherman in the opening cantos of *Omeros* (Walcott, 1990). This transformation is quickly followed by Philoctetes becoming an extension of Walcott's Crusoe myth and that shipwrecked condition. His island exile and separation persist in *Omeros'* Philoctete, but the haunting of his body by both colonial and precolonial pasts replaces

³⁵ Or simply the rejection of history as a list of events presented as causal relationships that continues to ignore alternative experiences and perspectives.

the snake's bite as the foul-smelling, festering wound that cannot be healed until the precolonial identity is restored.

If Philoctetes' legend is inspected, we can find more than the wound is replicated in his Saint Lucian counterpart. After the bite of the water-viper, the Greek version was marooned on Lemnos on account of the noxious smell his wound emits; this is similar to Philoctete's forced exile from his continuing his work on the water as a fisherman as a result of his own wound. The two warriors share the frustration of not being able to do the work that they identify with and this becomes an additional psychic trauma that they both must suffer. For the Greek, it is the return of Odysseus, the captain of the ship which abandoned him, and visitation from the god Heracles himself that convinces him to travel to Troy where his wound is eventually healed. For the Saint Lucian, only after Ma Kilman returns to him with both the African plant and the African gods is his healing ensured. It is only after the past returns to their respective islands and a spiritual reconnection is made with their ancestral gods that both men are healed.

The marooning of Philoctetes and Philoctete makes the ocean and their islands symbols of their respective isolations from the glory of war and work. At the same time, their injuries have impaired their talents, making them useful for neither war nor seafaring. The symbolism of both islands as figures of isolation and imprisonment therefore also operate as denials of the benefits of their labours, whether those benefits are the spoils of war or the income from selling the day's catch. Their healing likewise comes from across the sea in the shape of Odysseus and the African root that Ma Kilman discovers, and just as Heracles' bow leaps 'back to the palm of the warrior' (Walcott, 1990: 247), Philoctete finally recognises his 'shame for the loss of words' (1990: 248) and rises from Ma Kilman's copper cauldron ready to assume Walcott's mantle as Adam. Ma Kilman's garden is Eden and Philoctete can now return to the sea.

Although the sea is the primary force of separation in the text, there is the impulse to close that gap by crossing it. This is not only how Philoctete is cured, but also the process through which Ma Kilman is imbued with a spiritual connection to the African gods, who are described as having ‘rushed / across an ocean’ in ‘loud migration’ (Walcott, 1990: 242). When summoned by her, the sea voyage is conjured in the images of the pirogue making in the first chapter but this is most clearly demonstrated in the narrative thread of *Omeros* that focuses on Achilles.

Voyages over sea may be especially significant in *Omeros*, but the traveling accounts of the character Shabine in the long poem ‘The Schooner *Flight*’ published first in Walcott’s earlier collection *The Star-apple Kingdom* (1980) affords a provocative work for comparison in this regard. In the appropriately named ‘Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage’, Shabine describes sailing into a fog that turns into ‘a rustling forest of ships’ on which he recognises first three ‘great admirals’, namely: the English Admirals George Brydges Rodney and Horatio Nelson, and French Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse. Then Shabine sees the slave ships. This time, the figures are not just the English and French colonisers, but the flags are of ‘all nations’, suggesting our common ancestry. Stoically, Shabine stops shouting as he surmises that ‘our fathers’ are too far below the deck to hear his and the crew’s shouts. Most tellingly, he wonders which of them ‘knows who his grandfather is, much less his name?’ (Walcott, 1980).

This passage is relevant to our discussion for several reasons. Firstly, Shabine does not only share an affinity for and prowess on the water with his Saint Lucian contemporaries, he is immediately aware that the loss represented by the apparition of the ghost ships is not merely the loss of life, but loss of identity as evidenced by his wondering if any of the spectres below deck knows his grandfather’s name. Shabine is

already where Philoctete arrives when he steps out of Ma Kilman's basin. Furthermore, he is already on the sea voyage for the purpose of finding himself after seeing that he does not fit into the ethnically specific factions beginning to be established in Trinidad. Secondly, in the midst of the spectral ships in the mist, Shabine is able to identify Rodney and de Grasse who come to play a role in historicising Midshipman Plunkett's journey. Thirdly, perhaps the most striking aspect of this passage is that the slave ships contain both European and African spirits literally haunting the Caribbean Sea together. This is a relatively explicit image of these two inextricably entwined histories that has particular significance considering Shabine's mixed heritage. Finally, Walcott demonstrates that *Omeros* is not just interested in its imaginative relationship with Homer, but also in engaging and redressing the thematic concerns of his own previous works.

Like Philoctete, Achille's relationship with the sea begins at the poem's beginning cutting the trees to make the canoes. The language of the text is permeated by sea and surf in the same way that the Caribbean islands are, so much so that even images of the sky are substituted with a language of the sea. Thus, the cloud is the foam of the surf under which the swift flies 'confused by the waves of blue hills' (Walcott, 1990: 6). This spiritual connection extends towards the end of the canto with Achille feeling the hollows of the newly made pirogues 'exhaling to touch the sea' (Walcott, 1990: 7), foreshadowing the pull towards and across the ocean he will experience later.

It is interesting here to note that the moment when Achille discovers Helen's infidelity – thereby losing faith in her – he is poaching conchs and spies her with Hector. The scene from Achille's standpoint takes place almost entirely in and under water and several moments stand out from the rest. All of the imagery of the impending separation in this canto is again using the language of the sea. Helen's yellow dress

fluttering in the wind is made akin to a sail in the wind,³⁶ a reference to direction and control of a vessel's path and destination. Whatever Helen's intentions, it becomes quickly clear that she is not moving towards a life with Achilles. This is directly followed by the image of the keel of the canoe bumping Achilles's head. The canoe's keel provides its stability in the water, and while the vessel itself remains stable Achilles is no longer so. While attempting to stay out of the couple's earshot, Achilles worries about the clicking sounds of the conch shells in the boat knocking against each other because 'sounds travel for miles over calm water' (Walcott, 1990: 40). This turns the canto towards language and Achilles's wound. As it is injected in the midst of this scene of betrayal, a reader could be forgiven for assuming that the wound that Achilles has suffered is Helen's betrayal of him as 'he had sensed this thing with Hector' (Walcott, 1990: 49). However, while the fisherman paddles alongside his canoe full of poached conchs, he hears the shells rattling 'as his own teeth chattered' (Walcott, 1990: 49). His chattering teeth mirror Philoctete's 'rusty teeth' caging the scream of agony that 'was mad to come out ... rattling its bars in rage' (Walcott, 1990: 21). Now the 'deep pain' of the conchs' silence is peculiar to him, their inability to cry, to speak out, strikes Achilles suddenly as he has the noble thought that they belong to the sea and not to him. The conchs' inability to speak or cry out is symbolic of the wound that is being identified as Achilles's and a clear allusion to the African experience in the new world and the subsequent loss of voice and language.

The mirroring of the two characters' experiences becomes visible as Achilles's anchor is pulled up. The anchor, the object that has wounded Philoctete, is also the tool by which the pirogues can stay rooted in the constantly moving water. The particular wound that Achilles feels most at this moment is the loss of language. The inability he

³⁶ This is one of several examples of the women in this narrative being reduced and somewhat fetishized.

shares with the conchs is the inability to cry out as he is being wounded. It is this cry that he regains in the closing moments of the book when he howls at the ‘clacking cameras’ of the tourists, the cry that Walcott describes as his ‘last form of self-defence, [...] the scream of gangrene, and the vine round his heel // with its thorns’ (Walcott, 1990: 299). The mirroring is later rendered complete in the scene of Philoctete’s healing where his regaining of his senses is compared by the poet to *In God We Trust*’s journey to another world (Walcott, 1990).

Srila Nayak’s (2014) study of Achille’s sea journey is initially positioned against Homer’s *Odyssey* and the *Aenid* as a facsimile of what she refers to as ‘the epic trope of communion with a deceased parent’ (3). This comparison she argues is somewhat undermined by the ‘derivative’ nature of the sequence (Nayak, 2014: 4). However, she ultimately reads this section of *Omeros* as Walcott’s attempt to present ‘national, cultural, and racial roots as transcultural and translatable entities’ as opposed to rigid and inflexible ‘points of reference’ (2014: 8). The texts support this fluid interpretation. The sea both records and erases history as we observe Achille’s seabed journey is complete with vast cemeteries and the ‘barnacled cannons whose hulks sprouted anemones’ (Walcott, 1990: 142). The boats have faded from man’s history to become parts of the seascape. The image of Achille underwater turning into coral strengthens the perspective of the sea connecting the Caribbean to an African history, or at the very least, an African heritage eulogised and commemorated in a coral sculpted graveyard. It is eerily reminiscent of Brathwaite’s Guinean gods in *The Arrivants*, ready to ‘walk up out of the / sea into our houses’ (1980: 190).

Contrarily, in the same chapter that Achille traverses the ocean via the sea bed, illustrating the physical connection between old world and new, Walcott revisits the sea’s power to isolate and sever when he refers to each black in the new world as ‘a

nation in himself'. Even after establishing the common roots of the West Indian and the African, he eventually identifies Achille and the others as 'dismembered branches, not men' (Walcott, 1990: 150).

In contrast with the two fishermen, Major Plunkett is able to trace a genealogy to a name and a person he is able to place historically and geographically. Plunkett is able to offer us a parallel to Philoctete's journey suffering from a wound that is seemingly incurable. Although Plunkett's injury is suffered fighting the Germans in a trench in Tobruk during the Second World War, the psychic damage he suffers is similar to Achille's. The metaphorical amnesia that Achille suffers from is parallel to the literal memory loss that Plunkett ails from 'for months / in casualty' (Walcott, 1990: 27).

The scars made by the memories of the island's history understandably then have a corrosive effect on the descendants of both master and slave, the effect of which for Plunkett is his growing distaste for the Empire and his integration and assimilation into the local culture. Early in the text, Walcott reveals Plunkett's feelings towards other expatriates on the island and their affected accents, '[e]very one of them a liar / dyeing his roots' (1990: 26). After being given the opportunity to 'make a different life' for themselves 'somewhere on the other / side of the world, somewhere, with its sunlit islands, / where what they called history could not happen' all his compatriots wished to do was create versions of history that they could socially elevate themselves in (Walcott, 1990). Plunkett is able to see the futility of this exercise. While the other expatriates have misused the freedom granted them by their isolation from England, he appears to suggest that the 'history' that cannot happen on this side of the world is the type that begets wars like the one that scarred him.

Paradoxically, the war is what joins him to his Irish wife Maud, and it is a fascination with wars that defines the histories that Plunkett and Walcott both explore.

Helen and the island are framed with Walcott's fixation on the *Iliad* and Plunkett's fascination with the Battle of the Saints similarly directs his perception of Saint Lucia. Plunkett's relationship with his employees is important to observe here as his disgust of his fellow expatriates is established. Plunkett is able to recognize but not identify the 'forgotten pain' in the glazed and clouded eyes of his labourers. His view of the labourers borders on the condescending and he believes 'that their view of him would always remain / one of patronage; his roof was over their heads' (Walcott, 1990: 55). This is at variance with Maud's perspective when she tells Dennis that she sees the workers starting 'to behave // as if they owned' him (Walcott, 1990: 55). Both Dennis and Maude however continue to perceive the island's black working class citizenry through a prism of colonial white patriarchy that reduces Dennis' attempts at finding empathy into patronisation. A few points can qualify Maud's experience and its opposition to Plunkett's. She has not let go of the colonial experience despite her being Irish – the 'lot in the island' that she hated we can assume extends past 'the moisture rotting their library' (Walcott, 1990: 61). The irony here of course is the nature of the colonial relationship between England and Ireland is represented in their union; in fact Breslin argues that their marriage 'already crosses a boundary between coloniser and colonised'. In fact, in 1977 while being interviewed by Edward Hirsch, Walcott famously opened up about his appreciation of Irish literature while referring to them crudely or astutely as 'the niggers of Britain' (1996: 59). In this respect, Maude is a proxy of Penelope, an archetype that Irene Martyniuk describes as being simultaneously 'colonizer and colonized', and 'silenced by [her] gender' (1999: 142). Martyniuk chooses to read James Joyce's Molly Bloom from *Ulysses* into Maude as well, imagining her as the novel's truest 'hybridized postcolonial' (1999: 143).

For Plunkett however, England is an abstract and disconnected idea that the Atlantic has separated him from. It is now ‘merely the place of his birth’ (Walcott, 1990). Saint Lucia is his true spiritual home and he must come to terms with his relationship with and belonging to the island, even if his attempts to contextualise and understand that relationship are through a retelling of its military history that relies on patriarchal and colonial terms of understanding. Maud unfortunately, is trapped in competition with her maid and the island, and both island and maid have become her husband’s mistresses and are able to create what she cannot. In this sense, Maud is doubly betrayed as she must ultimately lose her husband to both Helens. While he fantasises about the satin skin in the ‘V’ of her stolen yellow dress,³⁷ he loses himself in a map of the island to the point that he leaves his tea ‘untouched’ (Walcott, 1990: 65). Plunkett seems to be misguidedly compelled to tie the Helens of his fantasies to Eurocentric points in history. This desire turns quickly into obsession and a clear neglect of his wife Maude. The result of this is a brooding isolation from both history and his diminishing Englishness metaphorically illustrated when Maude ‘briskly / loosened the bridal knot’ of the mosquito net over their bed (1990: 65). He becomes both the Crusoe and Odysseus archetypes for Walcott, shipwrecked on Saint Lucia and without a connection to any other place besides the island. Even Maud, with the many irritations the island causes her, finds that she has developed an aversion to London when she visits with Dennis.

Their disconnection from both England and Saint Lucia is starker when coupled with their infertility. We are reminded that all that is missing for the couple is a son, leaving Plunkett’s Odysseus to search for Telemachus in the body of a Plunkett who has been dead for one hundred and fifty years. While the Major dreams of a dead son

³⁷ This visual image is somewhat provocatively reflective of the yellow isosceles triangle in the national flag of Saint Lucia.

trapped in the volumes of his study, Helen is really pregnant, and her son represents a real future for Saint Lucia and not the regurgitation of history long dead and swallowed by the sea. After Maud passes, the Major's healing is the completion of his journey across the Atlantic, the end of his transformation from English to Saint Lucian, and his substitution of big island for small.

As Walcott writes of the Plunketts and their drive down the island's coast, he speaks of 'a white, amnesiac Atlantic' and then later Maud describes feeling 'the white sea // losing its white noise' (1990: 61-64). At the same time, it is the 'harbour after crescent harbour' that 'closes Plunkett's wound'. Here the ocean is not only the force of amnesia, but applies the same healing power that it has for Philoctete and Achille to Major Plunkett. The result of this healing however, is the completion of Plunkett's integration into the Caribbean and the diminishment of the empire's voice, power, and relevance – it being gradually drowned out in the roar of the sea and the voices of the people who remain.

A space where the text is less layered is in its treatment and idealisation of its women. For the most part they operate as devices for the male characters and Walcott. For a text consumed by wounds and isolation, Helen is neither. Three men obviously desire her, but the poem neglects to explore her motivations or her pain. Instead, she is largely sexualised both as woman and as island trophy. She is a foil to Maud's demureness, and her sexuality is presented rather viscerally in contrast to Maud's literal virginity in Plunkett's memory. Helen is neither lent the same level of complexity of Helen in *The Iliad*, nor does Walcott truly explore her emotions or concerns with the same intensity as he does the fishermen. Thus, her betrayal of Achille is never contextualised as Helen of Troy's betrayal of Menelaus is.

Ma Kilman is also a thinly developed character when measured against the others. Her abbreviated title presents her as a maternal figure and completes the full set of feminine stereotypes – the coquette, the demure housewife, and the nanny. Her role is rigidly defined as Philoctete’s healer and comforter, literally bathing him at the end of his story’s arc. The suffering of these women is not revealed. Do we assume then, that they are unwounded? That they do not suffer from some similar sore of history? How can we when the poet has stated that ‘affliction is one theme / of this work’ (Walcott, 1990)?

Ultimately, the sea in *Omeros* is a symbol of mutability, of shape-shifting, and renewal. It is a vessel of amnesia and separation while simultaneously offering the potential of new beginnings. This is illustrated throughout the text, first as a scenic element that saturates the dryness of land and air when ‘the ground / [can shudder] under the feet in waves’ (Walcott, 1990: 5). The sea is also presented concurrently as an eraser of historical particularity and as the one commonality of West Indian heritage and identity.

In ‘The Argument of the Outboard Motor’, the writer clarifies his view of the sea’s creative power as bringing ‘the concept of a beginning, of another day, the beginning of the possibility of another kind of culture, another kind of civilization’ (Handley, 2005: 131). This is a view at variance with how he perceives history in his essay ‘The Muse of History’ (1998). In it he declares that while he feared the ‘weight’ of it, he ‘felt history to be the burden of others’, instead what he chooses to focus on and be excited by is the ‘discovery’ that is possible having wiped away the nostalgia in the slave for ‘imperial modes, Europe or Africa’ (1974: 26).³⁸ This view seems romantic considering the Adamic naming of things that the poet espouses is deeply coloured in

³⁸ This note appears in the initial printing of ‘The Muse of History’ in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean* (1974).

his own work by the Greek epic from which it takes its greatest inspiration. Quite simply, the amnesia is applied to the characters but it seems never to the poet.

In 'The Muse of History', his admiration of the Guadeloupean poet Saint-John Perse reveals what is conceivably a more honest concept of his own poetic approach. For Walcott, Perse glorifies what he refers to as 'the perennial freedom; his hero remains the wanderer, the man who moves through the ruins of great civilizations with all his worldly goods by caravan or pack mule, the poet carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered - his poems of massive or solitary migration through the elements' (1998: 38). This appears a much more accurate description of Walcott's approach to *Omeros*. What he ends up with is a timeless and rootless world where Yoruba gods can butt heads with Greek myths while English and French admirals battle for Caribbean islands.

Returning to the rejection of consequential history by the Crusoe figure, Walcott suggests the 'Caribbean experience' as a possible 'antidote to the idea of a consequential history' (1998: 133). This idea resonates with Benitez-Rojo's work in 'The Repeating Island' (1985), considering Caribbean texts as 'non-discursive' or 'circular' as opposed to a structure that is focused on 'the phallic orgasm of a climax' (450). Granting that a 'people in a shipwrecked condition' inhabit the archipelago, it then becomes the ideal location to explore the possibilities for the New World inhabitant when he is no longer chained to his history. The embrace of that amnesia is what Walcott proposes 'is the true history of the New World' (1998: 89). In *Omeros* at least, the Atlantic is the constant symbol of that amnesia and also of the origins of master and slave as well as their tempestuous and capricious relationships. This may be

considered as one of the ‘manifestations’ that Benitez-Rojo discusses along the Antillean axis.³⁹

When this amnesia is not embraced, when the writer contemplates only the wreckage of history, all that can be found is despair at the atrocities committed by the Old World. This creates a perverted relationship to history where the events of slavery and indentureship take on a macabre sacrosanctity that bleeds into present day perspectives of identity and race. Therefore, what the sea in *Omeros* forces the new world citizen to do is what Crusoe does. That is ‘to strip himself of [...] nostalgia, memory, and despair, because he is in another place where he has to create a different kind of Crusoe’ (1998: 134). A comparison can then be attempted between the force that rises with Brathwaite’s dawn and the irrepressible sea that Achille leaves behind at *Omeros*’ denouement. The poets choose images of natural, or in Brathwaite’s case – cosmic, forces outside the realm of human control to close their books that focus on the lives of men whose loss of control and self-determination the poets have examined. Brathwaite’s lines are suggestive of a new birth and new reality with its own complications by virtue of its torn-ness, whereas Walcott’s epic ends with the sea’s irrepressibility functioning as a metaphor for the inevitability of time and history ‘still going on’ whilst Achille goes about the routine of ending his day on the ocean. Both scenes are sort of anti-endings and stretch towards images of infinite revival and replenishment on Brathwaite’s side and eternity on Walcott’s. The variance between the two finales here may feasibly be that where there is a trace of past humanity even in the ‘shattered homes’ of *The Arrivants* (1980: 269), when Achille leaves the beach in the

³⁹ Benitez-Rojo’s ‘repeating island’ axis also includes the North American locations Key West, Miami, and New York due to the presence of ‘vestiges of Spanish and French colonization’ or their large Caribbean populations, but it must also be noted that these points also inhabit Atlantic spaces.

final pages of Omeros, all that is left is the sea – implying the ambivalent relationship between historical time and the humans who are slaves to it.

Chapter Three:

Dionne Brand and the Liquid Eroticism of *No Language is Neutral*

Here is history too. A backbone bending and unbending without a word, heat, bellowing these lungs spongy, exhaled in humming, the ocean, a way out and not anything of beauty, tipping turquoise and scandalous.

–Dionne Brand ('No Language is Neutral')

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.

–Audre Lorde ('Uses of the Erotic')

Before approaching Brand, it is first beneficial to trace the work of black Caribbean women poets who both precede and write alongside her. The dearth of criticism for black women's literature that existed for most of the twentieth century, means that there is a commonality in the issues and concerns which often leads to such work being examined in clusters. While this may distract or detract attention from individuals, there is merit in tracing a sort of progression of female and feminist issues in Caribbean literature towards Brand's interests in the writing of her midcareer collection of poems, *No Language is Neutral* (1990). In Audre Lorde's essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', published in her reissued collection of essays and speeches *Sister Outsider* (2007), the erotic is identified as 'the measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings' (54). More specifically, Lorde locates this power in a specifically female and spiritual plane of unexpressed or unrecognized emotion. Patriarchy like every other form of oppression 'must corrupt or distort' those sources from which those it oppresses can potentially draw power, and for Lorde one such source of undeniable power is the erotic. She argues that the erotic has been

vilified and robbed of its value in the west, having been presented as emblematic of female inferiority in the hierarchy of the sexes. In order for women to demonstrate strength according to this logic, they must at all times subdue the presence of the erotic in their lives and consciousness. This suppression of self and emotion is a complete acquiescence to masculine constructs of power and ultimately cannot position women to own and know themselves in the world. Lorde suggests that male systems of order and power do not completely disregard the value of erotic power however, keeping ‘women around in order to exercise it in the service of men’ (2007: 54), but fearing the potential of this power ‘too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves’ (2007: 54). This ambivalence means that women are kept in subjugated roles in order for these male systems to parasitically siphon from this well of power as it suits them. Harnessing the power of the erotic then means to recognize and express those emotions that patriarchal society has for so long compelled us to suppress. Lorde sees such an act as not only empowering, but also a means of evaluating existence and meaning. She also takes pains to differentiate the erotic from its perverse counterpart, the pornographic, by arguing that pornography discards true emotion, instead prizing sensation and therefore opposing the source of the erotic’s power (2007: 54). The essay then attempts to make an argument for the erotic as an impetus for *feeling* meaning in our work (2007: 58). This chapter is primarily concerned with how the sea and liquid images operate as part of an erotically charged language with which the poet can construct a different sort of meaning.

Lynda Hall (2000), in her analysis of lesbian representations in Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (2005) and Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (1982), identifies several mother / daughter experiences with water in Gomez’s text that directly challenge the heterosexual norms of sexual knowledge and

awakening. Most importantly, these moments are deeply grounded in a watery environment similar to the ritual identified in the experience of Caribbean women in Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison's oeuvre as well as the writing of Grace Nichols, Olive Senior, and Brand⁴⁰. For example, the Girl of *The Gilda Stories* recalls the experience of being bathed by her mother awakening an erotic awareness that is not heteronormative; it is not just her mother but the warm water that acts as the catalyst for the sensual trance she experiences (Gomez, 2005). Both Lorde and Gomez describe other mother / daughter connections with water (most notably hair washing)⁴¹, as extensions of intimacy between mother and daughter that help to shape an understanding of the sensual qualities of water and its erotic potential

This vision of the erotic permeates *No Language* in an aesthetic that grounds the natural, the sensual, and the feminine in various liquid images. *No Language* marks the first of Brand's works in which her sexuality is explicitly explored, and its importance and daring is illustrated in its well predating most of the texts that directly explore the diversity of gender and sexuality in Caribbean literature. Evelyn O'Callaghan's *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction* appeared in 1993 and argued that Caribbean women writers reinterpreted elements of the West Indian novel in order to include female voices that were typically marginalised. O'Callaghan's work represents the first attempt to theorise the aesthetic implications and possibilities of considering Caribbean women's writing as a distinct category. Thomas Glave's anthology of lesbian and gay writing from the region, entitled *Our Caribbean* (2004), was published fourteen years after *No Language*. Before Glave, one of the earliest

⁴⁰ Specific examples of femininity being juxtaposed with liquidity (often marine environments) can be found in Goodison's 'Deep-Sea Diving' in *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (1995) as well as several poems in *Turn Thanks* (1999) which are discussed here. Other specific examples include Olive Senior's 'The Birth of Islands' from *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and Grace Nichols' *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984).

⁴¹ See *The Gilda Stories* (Gomez, 1991: 9) and *Zami* (Lorde, 1982: 32-33).

critical essays that sought to break that silence was Timothy Chin's "'Bullers'" and "Battymen"' (1997). Chin utilised the controversy sparked by the homophobia of Buju Banton's 'Boom Bye Bye'⁴² to unpack the gay and lesbian representations in contemporary Anglophone Caribbean literature. However, the landscape outside of literature in the Caribbean persists in open hostility to sexual difference.⁴³ I by no means wish to insinuate that the literary and critical environments of the Caribbean are immune to similar hostilities. Ironically, Caribbean culture is overtly sexualised and presented as sexually liberated in both its particular brand of tourism⁴⁴ and how it is marketed as well as within its own cultural forms – the lyrical content of dancehall, calypso, and soca for example. The obvious dissonance in this same space as being sexually conservative at the same time is often ignored.

No Language, these many years later, remains a progressive text in terms of its naming of sexualities and desire. Brand locates this work in Trinidad and Tobago, where successive governments have sanctioned the unequal treatment of homosexuals. Former Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, despite promising the British LGBT activist Lance Price that she would end 'all discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation' in a private letter made public by the *Trinidad Guardian* (Baboolall, 2012), announced that 'it was not legally possible' to do so just two years later when questioned on the topic ('PM: Gay rights not legally possible', 2014). She further offered that the issue 'is not really for the Government to decide ... [but] may require a referendum to get the views of the people' (Baboolall, 2012). Section 8 of Trinidad and Tobago's Immigration Act bars entry to prohibited classes including 'prostitutes, homosexuals or persons living on the earnings of prostitutes or homosexuals, or persons

⁴² 'Boom Bye Bye' was one of Jamaican dancehall artist Buju Banton's earlier successes in which the singer threatens and advocates the murder of homosexual men.

⁴³ Homosexuality remains illegal in the majority of the English-speaking Caribbean.

⁴⁴ The sexualisation and exoticism of Caribbean bodies and locations is standard fare for the marketing of tourism in the industry and indirectly encourages sex tourism (Duval, 2004: 33).

reasonably suspected as coming to Trinidad and Tobago for these or any other immoral purposes' (*Immigration Act 1976* 8 e). Thus the laws that remain on the books continue to police the movement of bodies across the real and imagined boundaries of land and sea.

The Act was most recently amended in 1995 to expand the rights of Immigration officers to inspect vessels arriving or seeking to leave the country (*Immigration Act 1976*). It is clear then, that the difficulty is not in changing the law itself, but in finding the political will to do so. Politicians remain governed by the will of the constituencies that keep them in power, and actions that humanise the queer citizenry are not often looked at with kindness in the Caribbean – a region still heavily influenced by the residual effects of Victorian morals and laws.⁴⁵ Persad-Bissessar is not necessarily wrong given the currently enforced laws of the republic, for if the written law equates same-sex desire with prostitution and then labels both as inherently immoral, this necessarily complicates whatever efforts can be made to make social space for gay, lesbian, or transsexual experiences to be tolerated, much less appreciated. This reality is challenged continuously by the work of local advocates like the writer and activist Colin Robinson, currently the Executive Director of the Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation in Trinidad and Tobago (CAISO) – Robinson is one of the poets included in Glave's anthology. Robinson tends to be the quote of choice in Trinidad on issues of sexuality, and having been approached to comment on Persad-Bissessar's initial promise to end discrimination, noted that he found the letter's contents 'very encouraging and thought it showed great understanding and leadership on the issue' (Baboolal, 2012). Conversely, Jamaican lawyer Maurice Tomlinson had just prior

⁴⁵ Sentences for persons convicted of engaging in same-sex sexual activity in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago range from 10 years to life imprisonment (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association).

challenged the immigration laws of Trinidad and Tobago as well as Jamaica in the Caribbean Court of Justice with the backing of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) under the premise that by barring the entry of homosexuals, both governments were violating his right of free movement as a citizen of a CARICOM member country. In an editorial entitled 'Belize and Trinidad – a lesson in homophobic exclusion' published by *Gay Star News* three days after Persad-Bissessar's comments emerged in *The Guardian*, Tomlinson dates the filing of his challenge to two weeks prior and questions the timeliness of the leaked letter to a news outlet as a desperate attempt at damage control for the country's international image (Tomlinson, 2012).

The Trinidadian academy is not immune from the tendency to silence the voice or erase evidence of the presence of same-sex desires. Indo-Trinidadian painter Shalini Seereeram's artist statement on her website identifies her motivations for painting as 'the multi-facets of women as being sensual, beautiful and carefree' (Seereeram), and it would appear that it has usually been comforting for viewers to process her bold and fluid lines through the heterosexual lens. In the editorial of Issue 6 of the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (2012), the cover of which was a Seereeram painting, Gabrielle Jamela Hosein and Lisa Outar locate the painter's work as a representation of 'Indo-Caribbean women crossing feminist, geographical, ideological, and historical waves, surrounded by feminine markers of power such as the lotus and continuing to carry responsibilities for family and community sustenance' (2012: 2). While this viewing is not at all inaccurate, it appears to deliberately ignore the sexual energy and visual eroticism that the painter's work contains. The women of Seereeram's art are rendered in a distinctive graphic style, bright colours bordered by thick and defining black lines. Further, the women are depicted in smooth and fluid shapes often embracing themselves or the bodies of other women.

Seereeram has enjoyed moderate success in Trinidad, receiving a President's medal at the John S. Donaldson Technical Institute, as well as being featured in the celebrations of 190th anniversary of the Angostura brewery, and exhibiting in The National Museum and Art Gallery. However, her exhibition *Intimate Moments* (2014) opened for 12 days late in the year at a gallery in Woodbrook and received little fanfare. The subject matter of the works on display presents Seereeram's visions of sensuality in a more perspicuous manner than her previous acclaimed work. Commentary on the exhibition is difficult to find online, and impossible to find from Trinidadian media houses. The premier art publication of the region, St. Vincent based *ARC*, published a review by Angelique Nixon (2014) describing the subjects 'as women of colour traversing a Caribbean visual landscape, centred and grounded in Trinidadian culture and people'. Nixon goes further⁴⁶ than Hosein and Outar are willing to by approaching these paintings:

as offering a visual terrain of what it may mean for women to love women in the Caribbean. It means affirming female desires for self and other women. It means visually representing same-sex desire through women's bodies in motion and caressing, touching and loving selves (Nixon, 2014).

The environment that Brand's work is rooted in is still, fourteen years later, one where heterosexism is not only encouraged and endorsed by every system, symbol, and model of power, but one where homoeroticism continues to be perceived as morally perverse and irredeemable. It is telling that so many years after *No Language* that the work to carve out a space in the Trinidadian landscape for same-sex desire still

⁴⁶ In an article on the *Commonwealth Writers* website, Nazma Muller (2015) provides a reading of Seereeram's work that is similar to Nixon's. In it, she addresses the lack of coverage in local media and quotes Seereeram discussing her work as a response to Persad-Bissessar's inaction in repealing the laws that criminalise homosexuality and unwillingness to consider a national gender policy.

continues, further cementing just how progressive a text Brand's collection must be considered.

LITTORAL POETICS AND POLITICS

In Brand's previous work *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (1984), shorelines appear as intensely political and historical spaces. In particular, the speaker recounts the American military's invasion of Grenada following the assassination of deposed Prime Minister Maurice Bishop and his supporters at Fort Rupert while invoking painful memories of the initial invasion of European power on Caribbean shores. In 'October 19, 1983', the speaker equates the arrival of American troops to despatch General Hudson Austin's military government to a re-enactment of the Middle Passage and enslavement; she refuses 'to watch faces / back once again / betrayal again, ships again, / manacles again' (Brand, 1984: 40).

For Brand, 'america' arrives 'to restore democracy' on the 'noisy beach' (1984: 40), eventually re-enacting a historically male subjugation of land and flesh by way of water. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's chapter on Brand in *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), 'Breaking Hard Against Things' is a major influence in my reading of *No Language*. In it, she argues that this serves as a reminder that the 'shoreline is never marked as a site either of erotic reclaiming or of material struggle on the fluid maps of *No Language*' (225). The *No Language* collection instead personalises the poet and these waterfronts in a way that previous collections do not and reinterprets the meeting of land and bodies of water as an intimate, erotic space. More interestingly, Brand utilises the ocean and the rivers that flow into it as a means to name and describe the desire black Caribbean women have for other women.

The topographies upon which these poems are presented within the text – Trinidadian beaches and river banks – at first not only point back to the politics of her oeuvre, but also attempt to remap and recolonize those spaces to include and in some cases be identified by Caribbean same-sex desire. To which purpose, Tinsley's chapter provides invaluable assistance in teasing these signposts out of the poems. As Tinsley makes clear, the utilisation of the refrain 'this is you girl' at the beginning of each of the stanzas in 'hard against the soul', inserts a femininity and eroticism in the imagery of the landscape that follows as well as the echo of the poet as she persists through the process of reconstructing herself (2010: 218). Throughout these lines, the sea emerges as a transformative power on both the land and the speaker's desire for the addressee:

this is you girl, this cut of road up
to Blanchicheuse, this every turn a piece
of blue and earth carrying on, beating, rock and
ocean this wearing away, smoothing the insides
pearl of shell and coral (Brand, 1990: 3)

As Brand maps the island, her absent lover – and Brand's desire - accompanies her through this process of mapping the landscapes and seascapes of the island in an intensely personal way. The map that Brand draws here does not make strict geographical sense, instead juxtaposing a diverse litany of places as Tinsley notes in *Thieving Sugar*:

Caribbean and Atlantic coasts, rain forests and swamps, fishing villages and coconut plantations, a north to which Afro-Trinidadians flocked after emancipation and an east where slaves worked the fields, a road that leads to the remaining Carib population and another that leads to the centre of the South Asian population (2010: 218).

This exercise is particularly interesting in that by literally drawing together environmental images that are considerable distances from each other and doing the same with communities that maintain a similar distance, Brand draws attention to the eradication of the similar expected divisions that challenge same-sex desire and the

literal distance between the speaker and her beloved. More damaging than geographic distance to the Caribbean lesbian's self-recognition and self-acceptance is the lack of recognition and acceptance afforded her by Caribbean communities. In 'This Body for Itself', written in the aftermath of the inaugural Caribbean Women Writers Conference in 1988 but published years after *No Language in Bread out of Stone* (1994), Brand recounts the aversion of the women writers in attendance to address 'the sexual body' (27). She at first attempts to rationalise what appears to her a very conscious exclusion:

In a world where Black women's bodies are so sexualized, avoiding the body as sexual is a strategy. So is writing it in the most conservative terms, striving in the text for conformity to the norm of monogamous heterosexual male gratification. Leaving pleasure to men, that's a strategy, too (Brand, 1994: 27). This rationalization dissolves into Brand's assertion that while the Caribbean

community lauds its women for 'their valour, their emotional strength, [and] their psychic endurance', it is routinely silent on 'the fine art of sensuality, the fleshy art of pleasure and desire' residing in them (1994: 28). Brand's response is to read a short story of hers, 'Madame Alaird's Breasts' collected in *Sans Souci* (1989) that overtly concentrates on the female body. More provocatively for an audience avoiding sex, it focuses on schoolgirls in an all-girls secondary school obsessing over the breasts of their French teacher. Brand senses that her choice is ill received and '[o]nly the feminists and the lesbians' continue to talk to her (1994: 30). Her crime, as she sees it, is crossing the invisible line of decorum in the minds of the women who at that point still subscribe to the heteronormative and misogynistic dynamics surrounding the writing and living of female bodies in the Caribbean (Brand, 1994). There is simply no space in that perspective of the world for lesbian and homosexual subjectivities to inhabit or exist.

The *No Language* collection personalises the hesitation of self-acceptance of same-sex desire bred from the construction of those barriers; the fear that likewise

restricts women from naming other women as the focus of their desire is explored in the penultimate stanza of 'hard against the soul':

this is you girl, this is the poem no woman
ever write for a woman because she 'fraid to touch
this river boiling like a woman in she sleep
that smell of fresh thighs and warm sweat
sheets of her like the mitan rolling into the Atlantic (Brand, 1990: 4)

This is the moment the poem becomes overtly focused on the poet's sexuality and the physical manifestation of that desire. She acknowledges the social barriers that culminate in the fear she identifies of lesbian self-acceptance that leaves those women in a paralysis that prevents them from touching or consummating their desires. That desire is physically represented in liquid terms, by the 'river boiling like a woman' instead of the reverse and the 'sheets' of sweat that connect both body and desire to the sea. This liquid aesthetic that constitutes desire expands to the landscape as well, threatening to quench the road, and 'wash up from the rocks' of La Fillete bay (Brand, 1990: 3).

In 'This Body for Itself', Brand directly reveals that she thinks that 'women learn about sexual pleasure from women' while recounting memories of her grandmother in imagined and liquid terms (1994: 33). The declaration that women learn from women does not appear a radical missive, but the author is moved to verbalise it as 'the politics of the body, the female sexual body, is closed or open only to the taken-for-granted', namely the socially accepted misogyny of traditional patriarchal norms (1994: 28). In the lines of poetry she quotes in the essay, her grandmother is first imagined 'swimming in the brutish rain' while later 'she gargled instead the coarse water from her eyes' (1994: 32). That is not to say that she constructs the memory of her grandmother in an unrealistic fashion, she laments that her inability to 'think past her time and her context' as she mentors her 'woman-children' ultimately leaves her statements

‘unfinished’ (1994: 33). Even in this acknowledgement of the woman’s limitations, Brand saturates the essay with a language of water. She describes her grandmother’s fingers as being ‘thick with wash water’, while her advice is ‘sprinkled ... sufficiently enough to be libation’ (1994: 33). With the preceding portrait of her grandmother’s matronly figure, it is easier to follow Brand’s thinking in regards to how she approaches sexuality. Women learn how to be women from other women; this intuition informs her dismissal of what she labels the ‘strict code of heterosexuality’ that dictates that sexual difference informs sexual desire. This passed down knowledge of *womanness* includes an understanding of the female sexual body that exists outside of its relationship to and without the rigid constrictions of catering to the gratification of heterosexual masculine desires or the violence implicated by the male gaze.

In ‘Bread out of Stone’, collected likewise in the text of the same title, Brand remembers several anecdotes of the violence that lingers in the performance of that gaze, from ‘the gauntlet of sucking lips and stares’ that the men in Cuba perform ‘religiously’ as Brand and her colleagues walk on the street (1994: 11). This violence, Brand argues, comes from a patriarchal (and sometimes racial) sense of male ownership of both language and ground: ‘women do not own enough obscenities to fill the air. Men own this language’ (1994: 11). Age and profession also do not provide protection from the violence threatened by heterosexual desire filtered through the lens of patriarchy and misogyny:

Outside the Brunswick Tavern on Bloor Street one night, a bunch of young white boys from the suburbs follow three of us. They say some words loudly, nothing understandable, but loudly and at us. They hit their feet against the pavement, come close to us. We cross the road. All of us are older than these teenagers escaped from Mississauga, but they make us cross the road. White and male, they own it (Brand, 1994: 11).

Part of Brand’s mission here and in other places becomes to liberate the female sexual body from this form of imprisonment, to claim it for itself, without regard for

how women may have been conditioned to distrust or fear the agency in embracing the body. The declarations of patriarchy that Brand recognises all appear to her as rigid and fixed so she attempts to move around and sometimes dislodge them through embracing more mutable terms to both address those models of patriarchy and to re-examine the sexual body. As Brand's critiques of Roumain, Lovelace, and Armah go in 'This Body for Itself', the examination of the female body often teeters between the archetypes of the virgin or the mother, with any complication or representations of womanhood that fall outside of that dichotomy being painted as perverse.⁴⁷ The cultural trope of the *jamette*⁴⁸ is presented at the essay's conclusion as a culturally appropriate example of what happens to women who appear outside of the two narrow models society has constructed.

Mark McCutcheon (2002) follows this process of Brand's rejection of these models and the subjugation they epitomise with the argument that the poet's use of liquid imagery arms her with the most potent ammunition against them. McCutcheon, unlike the aims of this paper, focuses his analysis on what he calls 'Brand's deployment of liquid imagery' in the language that constructs the reader's vision of Brand's character Verlia in the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996). That novel, published six years after *No Language* appears to be continuing a process begun in the poetry collection of interpreting female and lesbian sexual desire by embracing a sort of sensual utility of liquidity and suffusing it through a developing aesthetic. McCutcheon argues in fact that Verlia represents Brand's 'most concentrated articulation of liquid imagery' in that the character 'is drawn almost exclusively from images of liquid

⁴⁷ These archetypes consistently construct women in relation to men – simultaneously 'carnally knowledgeable' and 'inexperienced, waiting for inevitable control and ownership' by men (Brand, 1994: 35). As examples, Brand cites Eulalie Crawford from Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982) and Roumain's depiction of the country in feminine terms in *Masters of the Dew* (1941).

⁴⁸ According to Brand, the term *jamette* refers to a promiscuous woman. She cites Bridgette Brereton's suggestion that the word is derived 'from the French *diametre*' (1994: 47).

(blood, sweat, tears, spit, rain, rivers, seas, oceans, etc.)' (2002: 135). Perhaps more importantly, the first image of Verlia that is drawn for the reader is 'through the desiring eyes' of another woman (2002: 135):

That woman like a drink of cool water ... the sweat raining off in that moment when I look ... Hot, cool and wet ... I see Verl coming, like a shower of rain (1996: 3-4).

In McCutcheon's essay, the erotic potency of Brand's liquid imagery extends beyond the sensual into the political, and it must, if we consider the opening paragraph of 'This Body for Itself' where she laments having to explain that poetry and politics are so dependent on one another that they should not be considered separate and distinct (1994: 25). For McCutcheon, the overflow into the political by the liquid imagery 'envision[s] the Black revolutionary movement to which [Verlia] is committed as a radical kind of liquid power' (2002: 137).

With the ability to chart this liquid aesthetic as it is realised in Brand's fiction, it is appropriate to acknowledge here the marriage of that liquid eroticism and the female body at work. As Pamela McCallum and Christian Olbey (1999) observe, Verlia and her lover Elizete's relationship in *Another Place* is grounded in their work in the dry heat of the cane field, for which their desire provides a wet respite, that 'drink of cool water' (1996: 3). With this in mind, the fact that 'hard against the soul' in *No Language* finds its beginning in Blanchicheuse becomes strikingly important in connecting Brand's work to poems by Goodison. Tinsley unpacks the implications of beginning in this geographic location effectively in *Thiefing Sugar*. Blanchicheuse, Tinsley reveals, comes from the French *blanchisseuse* – meaning 'washerwoman' – and the fact the town was christened after laundresses working near the Marianne River in colonial times. The relevance of this information for this particular chapter is held in that Blanchicheuse was only accessible by sea at the time, and gained its name by virtue of the

washerwomen who operated at the mouth of the Marianne River on Trinidad's northern coast (Tinsley, 2010).

Tinsley argues that opening in Blanchicheuse implies a conscious effort on the part of Brand to destabilize the hierarchy of land over sea in cartography, quoting from Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (2000) where she writes that the map 'can only describe the will of estate owners and governors' (52) – demographic groups that were historically white and male - and is therefore unable to express the kinds of fluidity exemplified by the river, the sea, and the washerwomen. The racial and sexual privilege present in the traditional map's depiction of landscape also then makes conspicuous that which it omits, specifically any attempts to know the sea or consider the perspective of the island's non-white and non-male residents. Blanchicheuse having been named in a manner that neither privileges man nor land – that is, named not for European men, but for enslaved Afro-Caribbean women; and for its appearance upon approach from the sea – becomes the ideal starting point for Brand's focus. Tinsley frames Brand's exercise in decolonization here as essentially a lesbian map, as being focused and concerned with working black women 'so visible they could be seen from the sea's distance' (2010: 219). If the traditional map is noticeable for the language and speakers it chooses to silence, then Brand's work can be read then as an attempt to reinscribe the map of Trinidad in a way that considers those excluded voices.

The poet therefore is able to prioritise her approach to Trinidad in the terms of the mutable sea as opposed to solid land. This positioning privileges a similar mutability in how she decides to continue to navigate the island unrestricted by the politics of mapped lines and supports this new way of knowing and remembering Trinidad. Concurrently, Brand is privileging the experience of women throughout the collection, but also historically in the location where she begins it. The French term does not

literally translate to ‘washerwoman’, but rather a ‘woman who whitens things’. I find this translation much more nuanced than the one Tinsley settles on especially considering the fact that these women and their work in the river mouth mimics the action of the surf in that opening stanza, ‘beating, rock and ocean’ (Brand, 1990: 3). This subtle shift in the reading reveals similarly subtle puns where the addressed girl ‘make[s] it wash up from the rocks’ (Brand, 1990: 3), and the meaning of ‘warm sweat / sheets’ (Brand, 1990: 4) oscillates between a description of the women’s perspiration and the bed sheets after the culmination of secret lesbian desire.

This reading allows us to look at Brand as revisiting the washerwoman archetype that also recurs in Caribbean women’s poetry. The cycle of poems in Goodison’s *Turn Thanks*, equate the ritual of washing to two types of religious rites and is most complete in ‘Turn Thanks to Grandmother Hannah’, in which Goodison explicitly illustrates the parallels in the washerwoman’s work of cleaning the garments of the clergymen and the self-cleansing required to enter a Christian paradise:

She would wash, starch and smooth them
like the last few feet of the road to heaven
with a heavy self-heater iron, its belly blazing
with the harnessed energy of the coals of hell.

Every clergyman in St. Elizabeth’s parish
would seek out her cleansing service.
Reclaiming that which seemed marked
for perdition was Hannah’s holy gift (1999: 14).

The religious connection established in this poem differs dramatically with the washing rites displayed in ‘My Mother’s Sea Chanty’ and ‘Turn Thanks for Miss Mirry’ as here (as in ‘My Uncle’), the washing of men and their garments by women reinforces existing social hierarchies of gender. Simultaneously, the gift of washing is the anointed work of women, it is ‘Hannah’s holy gift’, her hands hold a ‘resurrecting power’ (Goodison, 1999: 14), the implication being that it is through Hannah’s commitment to

this domestic work that she can attain the respect and favour granted to the clergymen she serves. In both rites that Goodison explores, it is the woman who holds ‘the cleansing power / in her hands’ (1999: 14), buttressing and gendering the space as feminine or as where the work of women is done.

Images of maternal figures and the healing or liberating properties of water for the body are common in Caribbean literature. In *Omeros*, Ma Kilman washes Philoctete in order to heal his wound while Goodison includes four different instances of the washing of bodies in *Turn Thanks*. These baths often appear as rituals with both physical and spiritual healing properties for the giver and receiver. The first such example opens the collection’s first poem, ‘My Mother’s Sea Chanty’:

I dream that I am washing
my mother’s body in the night sea
and that she sings slow
and that she still breathes (Goodison, 1999: 6).

The intimacy of the imagined moment is striking; the deceased mother is reanimated by the grieving daughter’s dream sequence while the women offer a role reversal of the mother/daughter dynamic observed in other similar bath giving moments. The bath itself develops supernatural qualities by the second stanza, when the speaker’s ‘sweet mother’ has transformed into ‘a plump mermaid’ (Goodison, 1999: 6). As such, the mother figure is now presented as possessing a sensual and elemental connection to and dominion over nature and the world, ‘speaking sea-speak with pilot fish, / showing them how to direct barks / that bear away our grief and anguish’ (Goodison, 1999: 6). Concurrently, the washer also possesses a heightened connection with the natural through her use of ambergris⁴⁹ and seaweed to wash her mermaid mother’s hair. Here, the healing powers of the ritual are directed at the washer poet as she attempts to

⁴⁹ Ambergris is a waxy material produced in the digestive tract of sperm whales. It can be used as a fixative to prolong the effects of perfume in hair.

write/wash her way through the loss of her mother. However, there is an underlying anxiety throughout the dream sequence; as the mother's fishlike transformation does not just bequeath her her powers but she also becomes subject to the marine dangers of aquatic life -namely, man. She fears for her mother in the new world of fishing lines and fish pots, or the marine chores of her residence where even transformed into a mermaid she cannot escape the rigid demands of patriarchy and the limitations of the space she lives in. In 'My Uncle', which appears later in the same collection, the speaker observes the duties assumed by her cousins in the wake of her uncle's passing. The sons are assigned the task of building things - the carpenter constructs a casket while the stone-mason builds the vault. The daughters are also makers, seamstresses who line the coffin before they 'washed and dressed him / in a serge suit of dark blue' he had made himself (1999: 33). Strikingly, the women, unlike the poet's earlier dream sequence with her transformed mother, have to physically wash their father in preparation for the rite of burial. This act is not afforded any attention in comparison, reduced to another element of female domesticity echoed by the uncle's widow who subsists through religious piety and the devotion found in 'thin bible leaves' (1999: 33).

'Turn Thanks to Miss Mirry' deals with similar constraints of domesticity pressed against the trope of bath-giving. In contrast with the first poem, the speaker instead of giving is now receiving the bath from Miss Mirry, a domestic worker in the employ of her parents who substitutes for the speaker's mother and her expected role in the washing. Miss Mirry, who is unable to speak in any alternative language to the demotic Creole, instructs the poet 'that for every sickness / there exists a cure growing in the bush' (Goodison, 1999: 13). She thus exemplifies the connection to nature and nature's healing powers that she dreams her mother to have in the first poem while there coexists here the problematic presentation of Miss Mirry's subversion of the English

language as an incomplete exercise in language abrogation. The declaration ‘Miss Mirry versus English against the west’ (Goodison, 1999: 13) rings hollow within the poem as it is made clear that it is her deficiencies in class and education which leave her ‘a stranger on this side of a world / where most words would not obey her tongue’ (Goodison, 1999: 12). It is inability then, and not choice that determines her language and she therefore has been robbed of the agency and choice required to demonstrate such a resistance. Nevertheless, the last movement of the poem consists of the speaker thanking Miss Mirry for treating her measles by bathing her in the washtub usually reserved for clothes. In this ritual act of washing, Miss Mirry’s knowledge of folk medicine and ‘the emancipation tamarind’ heals the girl leaving the reader with the presumption that her too Western (and absent) parents are unable to procure a similar sort of healing (Goodison, 1999). Goodison does not just stop at naming the bath as healing, but infuses the physical act with spiritual and ancestral dimensions, ending with the implication that Miss Mirry’s language holds as much spiritual power as the tamarind leaves she has stewed. The imagery becomes religious; the waters poured over the head coupled with Miss Mirry’s ‘speak-singing’ invoke memories of the Christian baptism, resolutely connecting the ritual and the waters Miss Mirry controls to the sacred:

As she sluiced the astringent waters over me

she was speak-singing in a language
familiar to her tongue which rose unfettered
up and down in tumbling cadences, ululations
in time with the swift sopping motion of her hands,

becoming her true self
in that ritual bathing, that song.
Turn thanks now to Miss Mirry
African bush healing woman (Goodison, 1999: 13).

The final stanza teeters on the line of completing Miss Mirry's stereotyping as a Tantie⁵⁰ character. Having demonstrated ownership of the ritual and not of the language, Miss Mirry is locked in to a landscape of history as 'the repository of 400 years of resentment', barred from full participation in a language she cannot 'read or write a word' of, and seems in the end now reduced and sentenced to a particularly isolated social reality.

Jamaican poet Olive Senior's 'White' collected in *Over the Roofs of the World* (2005), reverberates with the washerwoman trope as well, echoing and riffing off of the representations made by Goodison. Senior introduces the character Miss Dora the laundress who rejects the metaphor that juxtaposes the whitening and cleansing of clothes against the spiritual cleansing of devotion and worship introduced with Grandmother Hannah in Goodison's poem. Dora vocalizes a resistance to the dynamic of whiteness being offered as a measurement of spiritual superiority, and its (here) unspoken reflection of the racialised perceptions of social hierarchies in the Caribbean that may be reinforced in the church. The poem's speaker essentially offers this argument prior to Dora's introduction by negating the spiritual imagery in the language of Christian hymns – snowscapes, sheep and shepherds being absent from the Jamaican geography – but also by recognising that while 'Heaven is where you have to go to become whiter than snow', this is just what 'they sing in the chapel' (Senior, 2005: 83). Dora is at first offered as an image that is congruous with Hannah's outright spiritual dedication to laundering. She is similarly one for whom '[n]o speck [is] permitted / to pass' (Senior, 2005: 83), but at the moment the reader wishes to align the poem as a parallel to Goodison's Grandmother Hannah, Senior provides Miss Dora an agency and ownership of work in a way that is not as readily apparent in its precursor:

⁵⁰ The Tantie is a play on 'auntie', but this figure in Southern Caribbean parlance is an older woman who plays an unsexed and maternal role in a family or village.

Every weekday, Miss Dora's
Laundry stays stiff and upstanding on the line,

like flags, in glorious array like cherubim and
seraphim, though Miss Dora don't business with that.
If you try to tell her that Heaven is the place to go
to climb the golden stair, turn sheep in the
shepherd's flock, become whiter than snow, she
will bridle and say, so what wrong with my big rock,

since when you dissatisfy with clothes scrub
on this washboard in tin tub, then how come you
never tell me you don't like how I starch, how I iron,
til now you have to go to some far away place
to obtain satisfaction? (2005: 83-84)

Approaching Brand's work through these other Caribbean women poets

necessarily informs our reading of these poems and their treatment of women's bodies especially when engaged in physically repetitive domestic labour. Choosing the washerwoman motif as a vehicle for such investigations allows the poets to present the female body in and alongside bodies of water.

That French translation is also provocative in our observation of this act of whitening. What is it besides clothes that the washerwomen are rinsing or what stains are they scrubbing out in the sea? Tinsley argues that the poet mimics the laundress by 'rinsing [...] the old (language) to make room for her new map, one on which epistemological and erotic decolonization coincide' (2010: 219). This reading does not explore the multiple potentialities of meaning here. The laundress and the vigorous physicality of her work, her ease of standing in both fresh and salt water, the constant flow of water from the river to the ocean, and the sometimes anonymous intimacy that is packaged with this sort of service work all suggest not just a feminised space, but also provides Brand an erotically charged remapping and renewing of Caribbean geography and history. Tinsley's reading of this new map, does not fully embrace the reversal of hierarchy that Brand is has reshuffled the priorities of land versus water and reduced the

importance of linear movement. This renewal is what allows Brand to now reimagine Trinidad as a place where lesbian desire can be (or maybe returns to being) a natural part of the landscape. This process of recovery and renewal is as violent as the women's washing to make clothes like new or indeed as the waters of the 'river boiling like a woman in she sleep' (Brand, 1999: 4).

Brand's general preoccupation with fluids appears an identifiably lesbian feminist approach that echoes the work of Luce Irigaray. In fact, McCutcheon points out that resonance between *In Another Place* and Irigaray's 'The Mechanics of Fluids' published alongside the title essay in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985). In Irigaray's work, fluids present a feminist alternative to the patriarchal mechanics of solids which represent a rigid rationality that attempts to make sense of the world in precise and specific terms.⁵¹ Liquids therefore offer incessant opposition to these rigid rules and especially refuse to respect borders established by a historically male politics. This offers the liquid aesthetic a critical and political agency that is illustrated by Brand's nonlinear and nongeographic transporting of the reader from the island's northern coast of Blanchicheuse south and east to the Atlantic coast of Manzanilla and back north again to Maracas. She need not be restrained or constrained by the politics of the island's map or by the solid mechanics of the land itself. Fluidity therefore allows the poet to navigate the space of the island unrestricted, with the freedom to embrace an order that makes a different kind of sense while encouraging the central consideration of her own erotic sensibility.

⁵¹ Implying a metaphorical relationship between the feminine and fluidity, Irigaray writes that 'the properties of fluids have been abandoned to the feminine', presumably due to the prioritisation of solids by patriarchal systems (*This Sex Which is Not One*, 1985: 116). She also argues that a full theoretical understanding of the world is impossible relying on 'solid' systems of understanding like logic – she states that physical reality resists logic due to its inability to 'incorporate [...] all the characteristic features of nature' (Irigaray, 1985: 107). Fundamentally, Irigaray sees her destabilisation of the metaphysics that favours the solid plane as a necessary act of feminism. This is the essential similarity between her and the poetics/politics of Brand's work in *No Language*.

The second poem, 'return', titles the second section and splits itself into two parts encapsulating the two portrait poems 'Phyllis' and 'Jackie' for Phyllis Coard and Jacqueline Creft respectively, two female Ministers of the People's Revolutionary Government in Grenada. Coard served as Minister of Women's Affairs, while her husband Bernard was Deputy Prime Minister. Both Coard and her husband were to be arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to die for the murders of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop – the death sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment. The focus of the second portrait, 'Jackie', refers to former Minister of Education Jacqueline Creft, who herself would be counted among the dead alongside Bishop at Fort Rupert in Grenada in 1983. *No Language is Neutral* is a departure from Brand's usual political occupations, specifically the failure of decolonisation in dismantling what Jacqui Alexander terms the 'continuity between white imperial heteropatriarchy [...] and black heteropatriarchy' (Alexander, 2006: 259 qtd in Tinsley) that continues to exclude and victimise women, lesbians, and gay men. In essence, as Tinsley quotes from Brand, even for radical Caribbean thinkers of her time, 'a woman is suspect even to other women, especially if she dreams of women' (Brand, 1994: 14). *No Language* operates then as a pivot in her body of work – a different, more personal approach to solving the same problems. This is the text's agency when read against Lorde's 'Erotic', a means of complicating and personalising the ways that Afro-Caribbean women come to know themselves and their places in the world. When this is considered against her political background, in particular her participation in the government of Maurice Bishop and the People's Revolutionary Government, the heteronormative and patriarchal politics of this and other political movements must appear dissonant. Brand herself lamented the sense that for the PRG, 'Black women's experiences were secondary and that men exemplified the voice, the life, the physical body and the spiritual breath of the

movement' (1994: 136). Even further, the subjugation of women appeared 'prerequisite' (qtd in Tinsley). Brand does not completely depart from the political, but by humanising Phyllis Coard and Jacqueline Cleft in *No Language*, female figures of power within Bishop's government, she is able to elevate them into central characters in a remembrance and reframing of the PRG's rise and violent fall.

In 'Phyllis', the speaker writes to Coard directly, but Brand again uses a refrain that genders. The speaker repeats 'I know they treat you bad' (1990: 8), a line poignant enough given Coard's long incarceration but the after the line break, the speaker adds 'like a woman' (Brand, 1990: 8), implying that her treatment is expected because of her sex. At its core, the movement was one that was primarily concerned with the overthrow of white patriarchy as inflicted upon black male bodies and not a challenge to patriarchy in and of itself. This important distinction must be realized as a similar failing can be found in the linguistic politics of resistance couched in understandings of Creole as nation language.

The first part of 'return' opens on an unnamed street in sweltering heat, continuing the previous section's focus on both roads and the environment before exploring the same space in the language of liquidity:

still I suppose the scorpion orchid by the road, that
fine red tongue of flamboyant and orange lips
muzzling the air, that green plum turning fat and
crimson, still the bougainvillea fancying and
nettling itself purple, pink, red, white, still the trickle of
sweat and cold flush of heat raising the smell of
cotton and skin... (Brand, 1990: 7)

In this passage, people are only discerned through their excretion of sweat. This is an odd way to populate the environment that she describes; using various liquids as the only signals of human presence. Later, she uses images of breadfruit milk dripping down steps, the sea, 'the butcher's blood staining the walls of the market' to speak

about the village's inhabitants (1990: 7). But when we return to the sweat near the end of the poem, it becomes gendered and possessed by the 'bare-footed' women of the village, as are their 'watery, ancient' eyes. The final line of this first poem juxtaposes this liquid and female understanding of the world with the 'hard, distinct, brittle smell of / slavery' (1990: 7) which by being characterised as a solid, brittle thing embraces the patriarchy of solidity which Irigaray combats.

The second part of 'return' looks out from some point in Guayaguayare towards what the poem's first voice believes is Venezuela. Similar to the refrain 'this is you girl' that appears in 'hard against the soul', this poem begins and ends with an interrupting voice correcting the 'girl'. The land that the speaker sees is not the unknown Venezuela but the familiar Point Galeote. Interestingly, confusing the familiar for the foreign is one of the collection's concerns by demonstrating that same-sex desire already inhabits the spaces the poems explore. This poem in particular however, continuously feminises the sea. The sea in Guayaguayare Bay is first through simile compared to the swelling of 'a big belly woman' (Brand, 1990: 12), suggestive of fertility and motherhood, yet in the second stanza the bay is no longer like but is the belly of the sea woman. The suggestion in this stanza shifts from motherhood to the sensual as 'every eye [...] must have longed to dive into the sea woman's / belly' (Brand, 1990: 12.) This shift returns us to the erotic power of women in the first 'hard against the soul' poem but projects it onto an anthropomorphised sea but in racialised terms since the reader is told that it is what every 'black face' desires. The image of the sea woman's belly is evocative of Grace Nichol's 'Invitation' from her collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) where very similar imagery embraces an almost defiant sexuality that embraces both race and size in the face of the unspoken and oppressive standards of beauty and desire: there's a purple cherry / below the blues / of my black seabelly (13). In 'Afterword', the 'fat

black woman' character of the collection comes out of the edenic forest 'flaunting waterpearls' that cling to her genitalia (Nichols, 1984: 24). These portraits of black female sensuality and desirability stand outside of the company and gaze of men, establishing an erotic quality that does not need to rely on the presence of men nor does it desire to be controlled or owned by them. Water and black women in Nichols' collection enjoy a relationship that provides a sensual and sexual escape from the domestic submission through work documented in Goodison's work and allows the woman to retain a sexual autonomy that may be challenged by the male presence. As Denise deCaires-Narain (2007) notes in 'Landscape and Poetic Identity in Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry', '[t]he woman's body is presented ... as fluid, transgressively speaking' outside of the reach of patriarchal hierarchies (48). Returning to 'hard against the soul', the racialised term of 'black faces' is tethered to the promise of escape that the sea provides whether to the foreignness of Venezuela in the first two stanzas, or death and madness in the following two. The question then must be asked: what is the sea providing an escape from? The lingering hard and brittle smell of slavery? Or perhaps, the speaker is offering the sea as an alternative to the rigidity and permanence of the ground and landscape that the women looking out to this sea are restricted by and struggle to find peace and place in. In either case, what is consistent is that the sea becomes seductive because of the unease present on land. This sentiment is made clear more forcefully in a sequence of poems in the later collection *Land to Light On* (1997), in which land is introduced as a suffocating force for the poet - 'land fills your throat' (Brand, 1997: 43) in the first poem of the section – and that aversion ultimately leads the speaker to affirm that she is 'giving up on land to light on' (Brand, 1997: 45). The disappointment then for those that swim across the bay – thinking they are 'swimming to away' (Brand, 1990: 12) – to only find Point Galeote becomes

Sisyphean, in that instead of the sea furnishing an escape from the rigid pain of the land, it returns them not much further from where they departed much like the waves ‘crashing and returning against Point Galeote’ in a gesture literally indicative of Brathwaite’s tidalectics (Brand, 1990: 12).

The title section of *No Language* begins where ‘return’ ends, on the beach at Guaya, a space that the speaker ‘used to haunt’ in a past life (Brand, 1990: 19). The beach itself, a short stretch of ‘nigger brown sand’ as opposed to the ‘backra white’ (Brand, 1990: 19) we can only assume belongs to the sorts of beaches that adhere to a different type of beauty, is sandwiched between two rivers of contrasting qualities. The first the poet declares dead and full of ‘waste and alligators’ (Brand, 1990: 19), its death apparently a description of its stagnation as it is compared to the second river which rumbles seaward ‘in a tumult’ (Brand, 1990: 19). Death therefore is ascribed to the first river’s stagnation and silence and the voice’s description of itself as a ghost. The contaminated, stale water of the first river then seems indicative of the Trinidad the poet remembers, a memory infecting the space that could not make room for who she was with stagnation, silence, death, and rot, with the only life identifiable amidst it all being the reptilian predators that complete the oppressive metaphor of a society willing to devour those who do not conform to the heterosexual norms it enforces. The alternative river rumbles, it crashes into the sea in an uproar. This is the river that Brand sexes, a space distinctly gendered female with the image of ‘little girls’ attaching themselves to the ‘hips of big women’ in their crossing of the river for fear of the powerful currents (1990: 19). Here Brand is able to claim the force of moving water as a metaphor for womanhood, and a phenomenon that can only be navigated following the knowing hips of older women. Indeed, the voice of the poem claims her knowledge as a form of

literacy, as being taught how to read the world by ‘a woman whose hand trembled at the past’ (1990: 19).

Throughout this section the poet echoes the themes of escape/exile and desire that begin in ‘return’ and continues to firmly anchor both of these in the ocean. In one of many lines that open dialogue with Derek Walcott’s work, the second part of ‘No language is neutral’ proclaims the history present in the Trinidadian beachscape resonating directly with ‘The Sea is History’ and attributing that history directly to labour and the body:

Here is history too. A backbone bending and
unbending without a word, heat, bellowing these
lungs spongy, exhaled in humming, the ocean, a
way out and not anything of beauty, tipping turquoise
and scandalous. (Brand, 1990: 20)

It is especially significant to note that the escape, similar to the fantasy of reading Point Galeote as the faraway Venezuela, is again framed explicitly by and as the sea. However, we must note that the sea - despite providing the route of escape from the island’s history of work and exclusion – cannot be trusted. The next line describes the horizon as ‘malicious’ (Brand, 1990: 20), as deliberately seducing and mocking the viewer and citizen of the island. The suffering out of which Brand presents the labouring body remains sexed in the third part of the title poem where the poet constructs the sufferer as her mother on the river bank, outlining the escape symbolised by the ocean as one accessible to women – even women who wear the ‘blood-stained blind of race and sex’ (1990: 24).

The subsequent movement of the poem leaps forward chronologically to find Brand as a young girl entering Canada for the first time with just ‘[f]ive hundred dollars / and a passport full of sand and winking water’ (1990: 25). In this passage of the sequence, the much yearned for escape quickly becomes exile:

I did read a book once about a
 prairie in Alberta since my waving canefield wasn't
 enough, too much cutlass and too much cut foot, but
 romance only happen in romance novel, the concrete
 building just overpower me, block my eyesight and
 send the sky back, back where it more redolent. (Brand, 1990: 25)

The encounter with the new foreignness of Canada intimidates and terrifies the young Brand. The literal and figurative concreteness of Toronto serves to separate her from the world built and examined earlier in the series and the arrival in Canada that was to represent the culmination of the escape yearned for on the beach at Guayaguayare becomes its own sort of prison. The frequency of marine imagery in these poems dwindles as well until the closing of the title section when the voice of the poems returns to the Caribbean, and with that coming back comes a reconsideration of the sea and the beach in particular as part of the geography of lesbian desire. The sea however, has become an echo of the poet's sense of exile as its near omnipresence in the earlier poems recedes to 'an ocean you come to swim in every two years'. The closing stanzas of the title poem conflate these images of seascape and declarations of lesbian desire and begin to position them alongside a challenge to language itself. Returning to the second part of 'No language is neutral', Brand begins by imagining ocean and history in terms of the Middle Passage and associates the violent oppression of slavery with the weight of spoken English.

No Language is Neutral brings attention to its own way of engaging language. Firstly, the collection takes its title from a line in Walcott's poem 'LII' from his *Midsummer* collection beginning an intertextual dialogue with Walcott's oeuvre that persists throughout her text. The line in its original form declares the ambivalence of the English language, comparing it to a 'green oak' under which all who write in it help to 'widen its shadow' and influence. Walcott too, has history venerating the values of English, lamenting his confluence of heritages in 'A Far Cry from Africa' when he

wonders ‘how [to] choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?’ (2007: 137). Brand’s repetition of this line in her title therefore is a provocative one. She engages Walcott with it, challenging the neutrality he suggests by uncovering the ways that language excludes and injures through sharp juxtapositions of Standard and Creole forms of English in her writing:

... Silence done curse god and beauty here,
 people does hear things in this heliconia peace
 a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong
 now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air
 rudiment this grammar. (Brand, 1990: 20)

A sort of fluidity is also demonstrated by this practice of blending the two, thrusting them together here in a similar fashion as she has geography. She is able to simultaneously write in both effectively, the same way she is able to inhabit various locations in Trinidad while remaining in intimate contact with the exiled lover through the incanted refrain at the beginning of the collection: ‘this is you girl’. Her language becomes increasingly fluid through the ‘return’ section into the title poem as Brand allows Creole to seep through her verses never completely embracing either the formal or the vernacular. Returning to the second part of the poem ‘No language is neutral’, the formation of ‘new’ sound is presented as a violent affair; the lips made to form these words are also ‘made to bubble blood’ (Brand, 1990: 20). This violent framing of the process hints at Brand’s own experience in both languages while being aware of what Teresa Zackodnik describes as the language’s ability to ‘create and regulate racial, gender, and sexual identities’ (1995: 194).

In Zackodnik’s argument, this ambivalent approach is reminiscent of the position of Brathwaite voiced in his *History of the Voice* (1984) - that Standard English articulates a Eurocentrism that is inherently alien to the Caribbean citizen while simultaneously operating as an instrument to restrict social mobility. *No Language* then

for Zackodnik becomes a rejection of Standard English's insidious signifiers that in turn deny Brand's personhood via negations of race, gender, and sexuality. Thus, the Creole that Brathwaite argues comes from a 'submerged' position in order for it to be 'constantly transforming itself into new forms' (Brathwaite, 2000) begins to resonate with the fluidity that the poet already utilises in her imagery to resist the stoic rigidity and solidity that the standard form represents. We must be careful not to deny the political agency of Creole however, which does not lack the ability to affect the way European languages are spoken in the Caribbean and the Americas. Both languages therefore necessarily engage in a back and forth, influencing each other by sounding out their competing ideologies. *No Language*, while acknowledging Creole as a countermeasure to the racist and colonial underpinnings of Standard English, does not offer it a reprieve from its own efforts to reinforce patriarchal and sexist norms. Creole, like the landscape, is guilty of silencing black woman voices. While the language does not repress or oppress via race, the education it provides of the woman's place in society teaches that the word 'woman' is spat and not spoken:

A woman who
thought she was human but got the message, female
and black and somehow those who gave it to her
were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman
at her (Brand, 1990: 24)

That the denigrated place of womanhood is defined in the social hierarchies represented by the Standard English and the Creole omits the possibility of finding a language devoid of misogyny with which to identify self and womanhood. When Brand travels to Canada, her mother's experience is starkly inverted as her race becomes the most important point of her foreignness. Her attempts to reconcile these two languages while living in Toronto leads her to conclude that the same family who rebuke her mother's womanhood is 'the only place to return to', essentially trapped between what she describes as 'the thin / mixture of just come and don't exist' (Brand, 1990: 26). The

conclusion the poet comes to is that the two languages, as they seek to silence and negate her humanity, must be replaced by a language that affirms her selfhood as black, as woman, and as lesbian.

This voice is found in the final section of the collection 'hard against the soul'. In it, the poetry becomes a bit sparser, and utilises the dramatic effect of ellipses. The gaps that the ellipses provide, hint at loaded silences where either the 'language is not yet made' (Brand, 1990: 35) or provide room for fluid emotional pivots in the poetry itself. Following the redaction and repression of lesbian love and desire present in 'return' and 'no language is neutral', 'hard against the soul' is more explicit and direct in using images of water and liquid with a fluid negotiation of standard and Creole language in its affirmations of same-sex desire. In this section, Brand creates a space in the poetry for both languages to bleed through and occupy space, to take turns in waves while resisting settling into any rigid pattern, continuously infusing her lines with oceanic images while connecting them with the act of making sound. However, the new world of seascapes and 'warm watery syllables' that 'hard against the soul' explores is not a utopic one (Brand, 1990: 35). Whereas the section opens with the sexual openness expressed in 'II', it swivels by the following 'III' into a repression of suicidal impulses presumably spurred by ostracization by a sexually oppressive society. 'II' is disarmingly intimate and is illustrative of the linguistic fluidity discussed earlier while being reflective of the limitations of language to express certain experiences and subjectivities:

a woman's tongue so like a culture,
plunging toward stones not yet formed into flesh,
language not yet made ... I want to kiss you deeply,
smell, taste the warm water of your mouth as warm as
your hands. I lucky is grace that gather me up and
forgive my plainness. (1990: 35)

Despite the simple giddiness of love and intimacy, included in this opening poem, the poet consistently resists any neat conclusions, choosing instead to demonstrate that all these worlds (and words) carry on like Walcott's Atlantic at the denouement of *Omeros*.⁵² The 'noisy' beach in Brand's 'hard against the soul' (1999: 41) remains a geography fraught with the violence of the historical landings, wars, and revolutions, with which both Walcott and Brathwaite are concerned, but she envisions the beach here and its 'murmuring thrall' (1999: 36) as a space for the mutual realisation of sexual possibility and the affirmation of selfhood for those whose worth language has negated. This smaller or quieter register disregards neither the epic and tragic history of the Middle Passage nor the memories and myths that travelled with the African peoples upon whom this violent history was inflicted, rather it personalizes those larger themes while persistently fixing our gaze outward to the rolling Atlantic and compelling us to see ourselves more than we do history.

⁵² 'When he left the beach the sea was still going on' (Walcott, 1990: 325).

Chapter Four:

‘Before a Raging Sea’: Poetry of the British Virgin Islands

A hundred stately ships have found
 their everlasting burial ground
 upon the awful reefs and rocks
 and from moles and graving docks

–Alphaeus O. Norman (‘Horseshoe’s Reefs’)

The lashing sea,
 heaving, giving
 islands
 as waves tossed
 in and out coves,
 spoke of connections.

–Verna Penn Moll (‘Connections’)

The islands of the British Virgin Islands (BVI), a British dependent territory in the Eastern Caribbean that comprises more than 50 islands and cays east of Puerto Rico, are often confused with the United States Virgin Islands – the formerly Danish territories of Saint Thomas, Saint John, and Saint Croix - or the Spanish Virgins which include the Puerto Rican islands Culebra and Vieques. While all of these islands are part of the same geographical group, the BVI have for the vast majority of their colonized history been in the possession of the United Kingdom and as of 2004, citizens of the territory were granted the right to hold full British passports. After the purchase of the Danish West Indies (Saint Thomas, Saint John, and Saint Croix) by the United States government in 1917, those three islands were renamed officially the Virgin Islands of the United States of America and thus over time the British dependency began to be referred to as the *British* Virgin Islands in order to differentiate itself from the new territory. Officially the name of the territory remains the Virgin Islands.

The name of the territory, in local historical lore, was bestowed by Columbus himself in honour of Saint Ursula and the 11,000 virgins martyred alongside her. As

such, the name adheres to the historical and continuing objectification of the Caribbean and the bodies of its people as paradisaical and virginal; as Mimi Sheller puts it, our land and bodies are objectified, ‘open to be invaded, occupied, bought, moved, used, viewed, and consumed in various ways’ (2003: 17). The longstanding marketing campaign of the British Virgin Islands Tourist Board has been to sell the islands as ‘nature’s little secrets’, operating on the premise that the primary allure of these islands in particular is their unspoilt or perhaps undeveloped beauty. Historical resistance therefore from foreign developers to attempts by government to build larger international airports and ferry terminals is unsurprising. Despite the emergence of cruise arrivals in the 1990s, as Colleen Ballerino Cohen writes, the ‘majority of overnight visitors to the BVI are white North Americans who charter yachts for a week or two in rented private villas or at small boutique resorts’ (2010: 4). Some of these resorts are owned by white British and American billionaires, the most famous of which is perhaps Richard Branson – who has been able to acquire both Necker Island and nearby Mosquito Island as ultra-expensive vacationing spots for celebrities and the very wealthy.

A BRIEF HISTORY

To provide some context to the discussion, the history of the territory continues to exist largely in local legend and oral tradition, given the dearth of historical documentation. An example of one of the legends that persist is the ruin Fort Purcell which was colloquially renamed ‘The Dungeon’ near Pockwood Pond on Tortola’s south western coast. In the minds of many locals, the small and damp underground space in that structure was a dungeon for the torturing of runaway or belligerent enslaved people. However, archaeological experts have since identified the structure as a military fort originally constructed by the Dutch and destroyed by the English during

the 1600s (Pickering, 1987: 68). There are few texts⁵³ dedicated solely to the history of these islands, and two of the most quoted are written by non-locals. The Guyanese historian Isaac Dookhan lived for some time on Saint Thomas in the United States Virgin Islands working as a professor of history at the University of the Virgin Islands, and while employed there wrote the *Post-emancipation History of the West Indies* (1977) and *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (1974) which was published posthumously. More important to my concerns than either of those however, was the 810 page tome *A History of the British Virgin Islands* (1975).⁵⁴ The other oft-referred text is Florence Lewisohn's self-published *Tales of Tortola and the British Virgin Islands* (1989). Lewisohn's work however does not purport to be historical and she cites no authorities or documents in order to support the book's contents. Perhaps the most popular author is local singer and newspaper publisher Vernon Pickering. Pickering published *A Concise History of the British Virgin Islands* in 1987, and perhaps due to the difficulties of marketing such a book ultimately chose Falcon Publications International as his publisher. Today, that company has transformed into New Falcon Publications and focuses more on esoteric and mystical titles than it does on history. Tortolan educator Norwell Harrigan also taught at the University of the Virgin Islands and published much of his research alongside his long-time collaborator Pearl Varlack through the Caribbean Research Institute which was housed at the same university. Harrigan and Varlack wrote and published several titles focused on the British Virgin Islands (which they generally refer to simply as the Virgin Islands). Of

⁵³ This chapter contains them all: *A History of the British Virgin Islands* (Dookhan, 1975); *The Virgin Islands Story* (Harrigan and Varlack, 1975); *A Concise History of the British Virgin Islands* (Pickering, 1987); *Ye Yslands of Enchantment* (Harrigan and Varlack, 1988); and *Tales of Tortola and the British Virgin Islands* (Lewisohn, 1989). At times these texts contradict each other, and the work to verify the information and conclusions contained in them is ongoing by contemporary local historians.

⁵⁴ All of Dookhan's books were published or reprinted by the University of the West Indies in small runs.

those texts, the two that persist in the thinking and work of local historians are *The Virgin Islands Story* (1975) and *Ye Yslands of Enchantment* (1988). *The Virgin Islands Story* more so than any other text available is dedicated to understanding the territory's political evolution from plantocracy to representative democracy, while *Ye Yslands*, presents summarised historical demographic and economic reports alongside yearly blurbs of important events from the arrival of Columbus to the 1980s.

In contemporary times, the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College has established a Virgin Islands Institute staffed by two historians and an archaeologist who both research and teach Virgin Islands history from an amalgamation of various historical texts and documents. Those three individuals have also been driving the training of the territory's teachers to teach Virgin Islands history in the primary and secondary schools and move the understanding of the history of the territory from the arena of legend to that of statements substantiated by documents and records. One of the major community projects led by one of those historians, Katherine Smith, is the restoration of St. Phillip's Church and burial ground in the area of Kingston, Tortola as a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site.

While various indigenous peoples permanently settled in these islands from around 100 BC, an excavation in the Belmont area on the western end of Tortola has uncovered evidence of their presence as early as 1500 BC (Pickering, 1987: 6). Christopher Columbus landed almost 3000 years subsequently and claimed the islands for the Spanish Empire. The Spanish however, focused their attentions on settling the larger islands of the north eastern Caribbean - in particular Puerto Rico and Hispaniola – which led to their claim to Las Virgenes being contested by the Dutch, French, Danish, and most vigorously by the English (Harrigan and Varlack, 1988: 14). The small islands and their many coves, bays, and hiding places made them particularly attractive to

pirates and privateers throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. Eventually English settlers established mostly plantations of sugar cane upon which generations of enslaved Africans were forced into labour and suffered innumerable atrocities (Pickering, 1987: 28).

After the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834, a series of natural disasters ravaged the Leeward Islands (Harrigan and Varlack, 1975: 64). Tortola, in particular, suffered hurricanes, a tsunami, a drought, outbreaks of cholera and smallpox, and a major fire in the capital Road Town. Emancipation brought freedom, but the lives of most Virgin Islanders did not improve to the degree they had expected. Alongside and to some extent because of the aforementioned disasters, the plantation economy was collapsing and there was no clear model replacing it. Misguidedly, the territory's administrators attempted to address the economic issues on the backs of those least capable of bearing the cost of increased taxes. This uncomfortable reality festered in the society eventually bubbling over in the insurrection and burning of the capital Road Town over the Cattle Head tax in 1853 (Harrigan and Varlack, 1975: 65). The territory, like many other islands, sunk into a depression that showed no signs of recovery. This insurrection had as its context the slave revolt in Saint Croix and betrayed a general discontentment with both colonial and the representative leadership that remained long after (Lewisohn, 1966: 61).

In the years leading up to the turn of the century, the economy showed little signs of recovery. Locals who could afford to send their children to grammar school in Antigua began to do so, and did with more regularity in the first decades of the 1900s (O'Neal, 2004: 32). Some eventually migrated to work on other British territories as civil servants while others left to study law or medicine in the United States and the

United Kingdom. However, this was not the norm and most Virgin Islanders did not have these options.

By the turn of the century, rural Virgin Islanders started emigrating to find work. The most popular destinations were the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico working on the sugar plantations revitalized by American investment (O’Neal, 2004: 1). The opportunities in the Dominican Republic in particular were largely framed by wars, specifically the Ten Years’ War in Cuba, the Franco-Prussian War, and the American Civil War (Martinez Vergne, 2005: 8). These conflicts had the effect of stunting the production of sugar in those regions, creating an opportunity for the Dominican Republic to move to the forefront of the sugar manufacturing industry (Betances, 1995: 26). The villages of La Romana and San Pedro de Macoris were transformed into bustling ports and boats would sail to Tortola bringing produce, money, and men back home from the Dominican Republic (Harrigan and Varlack, 1975: 102).

The earnings were far beyond what was available elsewhere and Virgin Islanders emigrated to become workers during cane cutting season along with many others from the Leeward Islands (Martinez Vergne, 2005: 87). There, all non-Hispanic Afro-Caribbean people were referred to as *cocolos*.⁵⁵ The term referred to ‘black migrant workers who were contracted largely from the British territories [of the Caribbean] to work on sugar plantations between the 1880s and 1920s’ (Howard, 2001: 24). These men and women migrated out of necessity due to the poor economic conditions in the Lesser Antilles at the time and from which the Dominican sugar industry represented some salvation. However, once there, their race, their foreignness made them easy targets for racial prejudice and violence (Martinez Vergne, 2005: 87).

⁵⁵ The etymology of the term *cocolo* remains disputed. The oral history of the British Virgin Islands claims that it is a mispronunciation of ‘Tortola’ by monolingual Dominicans. However, most academic writings suggest a definition of the term as a way of signifying Afro-Caribbean people who migrated to the Dominican Republic from French, Dutch, or British colonies to work in the sugar industry (Guadeloupe, 2009: 275).

The occupation of the Dominican Republic by the United States in 1916 brought an end to the movement of these labourers into the country with the passing of overtly racist laws prohibiting immigration by ‘any race except Caucasian’ (Plant, 1987: 19). During this period up until 1924, work in the British Virgin Islands was scarce and men from the rural areas would rely on farming or fishing and trade with Saint Thomas and Saint John. Despite these discriminatory laws, the workers who remained were able to rely on both their formal educations as well as their English tongues which granted them the advantage of being able to communicate with the American owners and managers of the plantations (Del Castillo and Murphy, 1987: 57).

Being thus established, these originally Anglophone Caribbean groups established themselves into communities in the areas of the plantations, namely San Pedro de Macorís and La Romana. Those communities still exist today in varying degrees of interchange, visitation, and emigration occurs with those territories from which their ancestors hailed. On the 26th of July 1926, nearing the end of this period of seasonal migration, the schooner *Fancy Me*, which was carrying 89 passengers and a shipment of sugar, was lost on its way home from San Pedro de Macoris. The boat encountered a storm after a day’s sail and was forced to shelter on Isla Saona. The boat’s heavy anchor was trapped under a shipment of sugar meant to sustain a year of Tortola’s needs and was therefore irretrievable. The light anchor broke and the schooner wrecked on the rock El Caballo Blanco. The catastrophe reverberated throughout the islands. At least 59 souls were lost in the wreckage and it is often said in remembrances that no family was untouched by this tragedy of the sea (Maurer, 1997: 48).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Accounts of the tragedy can be found in *Such Are the Hours to Find Peace* (1998) compiled by Janet Smith (a descendant of the *Fancy Me*’s captain) from her father’s notes from interviewing survivors as well as a recent article by maritime historian Geoffrey Brooks (2015). The survivor interviews provided inspiration for parts of poems included in *Make Us All Islands*.

TWO POETS OF THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

The above epigraphs are taken from the poetry of Anegadian Alphaeus Osario Norman⁵⁷, the earliest local writer whose work has survived to the present day. Norman was born in 1885, was an engineer by trade and at the time of his death in 1942 worked in the shipping port at Charlotte Amalie, Saint Thomas in the United States Virgin Islands. The closest thing to a biography that exists on the eminent local poet of the time resides in the memoir of another notable British Virgin Islander, the entrepreneur and philanthropist Joseph Reynold O'Neal. O'Neal devotes about five pages to Norman spread out through his memoir *Life Notes: Reflections of a British Virgin Islander* (2004). According to him, Norman trained as a blacksmith through an apprenticeship with the Royal Mail Factory in Saint Thomas – a skill which enabled him to travel to the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Mexico before settling in Road Town, the capital of the British Virgin Islands located on the island of Tortola (O'Neal, 2004: 24). Norman was also an accomplished seaman, having had two sloops (the *Spider* and the *Pelicanus*) built for him to sail goods for trade to and from the Leeward Islands and the Dominican Republic. When the United States joined the Second World War, Norman would find work on Saint Thomas manning earthmoving equipment, and it would be while working with one such machine that an accident brought his life to a violent end. Throughout his time resident on Tortola, Norman was known as a poet and historian, writing his poems in an exercise book he carried everywhere and collecting pre-Columbian artefacts (O'Neal, 2004: 25).

Norman may quite possibly have been one of the most prolific poets from the British Virgin Islands, but unfortunately the poetry he wrote is not readily or widely

⁵⁷ Norman's official birth certificate records his name as Alphaeus Osoris Norman, but it is unclear if this is a clerical error as every other reference to him in public documents names him as Alphaeus Osario Norman.

accessible due to the paucity of publication avenues during his time. His work survives somewhat through government publications and the personal collection of his granddaughter Andria Flax. A preoccupation with the sea and the Virgin Islands history submerged in it prevails in Norman's work: the poems that I have been able to acquire⁵⁸ are ballads that are devoted to ships lost at sea, the evolution of the inhabitants of the islands from enslavement to autonomy, or exploring the mythic power and terror of the sea. Overall, inasmuch as seven poems can define a poet's concerns and focuses, Norman is fixated on documenting moments of historical significance to these islands through his poetry. The sea appears universally in these poems, ranging in form from a metaphorical paradise for marooned slaves in the poem 'Amina Negroes' (see Appendix One: Fig. 1) – a work detailing the 1733 insurrection of enslaved Africans on Saint John – to an unyielding and tempestuous supernatural force in the sinking of vessels the *HMS Valerian* and the *Fancy Me*. However, the primacy of the sea in its roles in Norman's work is its place in the storming and unrelenting tempest. Of the seven poems that can be read, four present the sea as such. No chronology exists for these poems, so it is difficult to surmise when they were written or whether, in unseen poems, he may have deviated from this particular presentation of the sea.

Norman's poems are also submerged in biblical, literary, and mythical allusions when depicting the sea in this way. By doing this he seems to paint a deified intent into the tempests he describes. He begins 'Horseshoe's Reefs' (see Appendix One: Fig. 2)

⁵⁸ The poems (with the exception of 'The Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*') included in the Appendix were made available to me personally through correspondence with Norman's granddaughter Andria Flax. They were received on several loose type-written sheets, having been transcribed from originals that were not accessible. The elegy to the *Fancy Me* was transcribed from *150 Years of Achievement: 1834-1984* (1984:), a publication of the government's Department of Culture celebrating 150 years of emancipation.

by describing the impenetrable darkness that plagues sailors seeking to navigate Horseshoe Reef⁵⁹ off the coast of Anegada:

Egyptian darkness reigns supreme
from Horseshoe Reef to Sopher's stream. (Appendix One: Fig. 2)

The phrase 'Egyptian darkness' is rooted referentially to the book of Exodus as one of the plagues that Yahweh besets upon Egypt in order to coerce the release of the Israelites in slavery:

Yahweh then said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards heaven, and let darkness, darkness so thick that it can be felt, cover Egypt'. So Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and for three days there was thick darkness over the whole of Egypt' (Exodus 10: 21-22).

More ominous than the darkness for the sailor is the reef the sea conceals. The sea that Norman examines is consistently presented as a powerful and dangerous force full of deadly phenomena. Reefs are hidden in waves and hurricanes materialise unexpectedly. Elsewhere, in 'Loss of the HMS Valerian'⁶⁰ (see Appendix One: Fig. 3), the opening line owes much to *The Tempest*, where the sprite Ariel reports to Shakespeare's good wizard Prospero how well the plan to incapacitate the King and his court has gone. Norman spins the line in question, 'the still-vexed Bermudas' (Shakespeare, 1987: 1.2:229), into 'Still vexed were the Bermudas / Still were they *tempest* tost / When the good ship Valerian / And most her crew were lost' (Appendix One: Fig. 3). This overriding focus continues throughout this particular poem, at times comparing the wrecked Royal Mail ship to the Titans of Greek mythology and contextualises the loss of its British crew and their afterlife in terms of the Norse legend of Valhalla while comparing their entombment in the sunken ship with Viking burials. Norman has a clear

⁵⁹ Horseshoe Reef is a 29 kilometre long barrier coral reef; the largest such formation in the Caribbean, and the fourth largest in the world. Over the centuries, hundreds of shipwrecks have occurred along it (including the Portuguese slaver the *Donna Paula* in 1819). More information about these shipwrecks is included in an informal list by Tage Blytman entitled *The Saga of the Anegada Island Shipwrecks: 1500-1899*.

⁶⁰ The HMS Valerian was a British warship that sank on 22 October 1926 off the coast of Bermuda in a hurricane.

desire to root his writing deeply in the sea and these various mythologies give his poems a self-awareness of the histories they record. Such a juxtaposition of various major events in the history of these islands against these myths so steeped in the supernatural infuses the local, smaller histories with an epic grandeur. Throughout the work that we have, Norman seems driven to use mythical allusions to elevate the historical experiences of Virgin Islanders alongside Shakespeare and the finest Victorian ballad writers.

Besides the consistently mythically and supernaturally violent sea, ‘Horseshoe’s Reefs’ and ‘Loss of the HMS Valerian’ thematically position the sea as a burial ground, another consistent element of Norman’s poetry and its presentation of the sea. This framing of the ocean symbolically presents the sea, similarly to Walcott, as a crypt of history but also more practically of bodies and ships. In ‘Horseshoe’s Reefs’, Norman writes that:

[a] hundred stately ships have found
 their everlasting burial ground
 upon the awful reefs and rocks
 and from moles and graving docks. (Appendix One. Fig. 2)

The poem primarily bemoans the lack of a beacon to warn ships that come upon the reef despite being written hundreds of years after the first wreck. Norman, perhaps being a sailor himself, imbues a sense of a fraternity of the sea in his elegiac poetry. His lines grieving over the lives of the sailors lost with the HMS Valerian in 1926 were inspired by the fact that the same crew two years prior were in the British Virgin Islands providing relief following the devastation wrought there by a hurricane. A semblance of an account of their assistance can be found in the notes by Agnes Hancock, the wife of the sitting Monarch’s Representative in the islands at the time of the hurricane, Captain Otho Hancock, OBE:

On September 9th HMS Valerian arrived with the Acting Governor, Archbishop and other good friends. All the ship's crew worked for two days, but even 60 of them couldn't move a house which still completely blocks the road which had been floated off its foundations.

They brought us food and seven huge cases of clothing. These we have in the church and three of us are sorting and doing up parcels all day. Long lists are coming in from all parts of the island (Tortola) and outlying islands asking for clothes...some lists have things like the following example – "Have lost roof, trunk and three children". (1924, pers. comm. 28 August).

Given the severity of the storm, and the speed of the aid provided by the Valerian's men it is unsurprising that Norman felt so moved to write in their honour.

In keeping with this sentiment, across several poems Norman constructs a fraternity of sea voyagers be they black or white, slave or slaver. Such a fraternity is constructed in classic Victorian sensibilities that may at times appear patriarchal, hyper-masculine, and heteronormative in tone. For example, in 'Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*' the gendered pronouns 'he' and 'she' appear where 'he' is solely attributed to the captain and 'she' applies only to the ship itself. Norman also chooses at the poem's conclusion to immortalise and revere the captain of the ship for choosing to go down with it: 'in Saona's clayery dust / his mouldering body lies' (Appendix One. Fig. 4). In the arena of boating elegies which Norman is operating, there is not much space for realities that are gendered differently, a reflection of the times and spaces he inhabited. In 'Amina Negroes', a poem commemorating the revolt of enslaved Ghanaians on the neighbouring island of Saint John in the Danish West Indies in 1733, Norman uses the types of descriptors expected in poems of great wars. The 'Amina', as Norman refers to them, is the Ghanaian ethnic group that the majority of the people involved in the insurrection belonged to. Ray A. Kea (1997) explains further:

The essentialist and essentializing term "Amina(s)" generally signified Akan-speaking people from the Gold Coast. The Saint John rebels were principally Akwamu men and women, most of whom had been sold to the trading agents of the Danish West Indies and Guinea Company

between 1730 and 1733 following the military and political collapse of the Akwamu state in 1730. Their life experiences registered a catastrophic transformation: from the status of free, privileged members of one political community to the status of unfree, labouring nonmembers of another. The term was also used to include Adanme; that is, people of the La(doku) kingdom. Adanme men and women were actively involved in the insurrection (1997: 160).

Interestingly, the insurrection that Norman immortalises was the first island-wide, well-planned, and successful rebellion of enslaved peoples in the Danish West Indies lasting almost seven months between November 1733 and June 1734. The various Akan peoples arrived to Saint John in a succession of Danish slaving vessels between 1730 and 1733 and were quickly identified as being the most unmanageable of those enslaved on the island. The Governor of the Danish West Indies at the time, only identified as Gardelin, in his appeal for military assistance to Monsieur le Marquis de Champigny, the Governor General of the French Windward Islands, described the Amina as ‘the worst runaways of all Blacks’ (Caron and Highfield, 1981: 26), with the implication that this recalcitrant reaction to their enslavement is in part due to the specific belief ‘that at their death they return to their fatherland’ (Kea, 1997: 159). Death therefore, held no terror to the Amina, and this outlook would fuel the ferocity of the rebellion and seal its near mythical conclusion.

Norman’s poem begins in Africa and the men who would lead this rebellion are immediately identified as ‘[a] band of the Amina sons’, euphemistically juxtaposing them with European soldiers and the language that identifies them as noble defenders of something greater than themselves in Victorian and First World War Poetry. At times the lyrical qualities are reminiscent of Lord Alfred Tennyson and poems like ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’⁶¹ especially in its attribution of nobility and bravery in

⁶¹ In particular, the first two lines of the final stanza of ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’: ‘When can their glory fade? / O the wild charge they made!’ bear more than a passing affinity for Norman’s lines in the penultimate stanza of ‘Amina Negroes’: ‘Who can forbid that prayers be said? / Or carols changed for the dead?’

what is ultimately a hopeless endeavour as well as its challenging of the reader to deny the same to them. The opening line of the poem establishes and accentuates the maleness of the Akan insurrectors, such that the complete absence of the Amina women from the narrative is curious, and the only presence of women at all is the line that refers to the deaths of Danish women referred to as ‘maidens’ who have ‘lost their heads’ (Appendix One. Fig. 1). This male-centeredness of perspectives of glory and war is not out of place with the Tennyson example or with the tendency of war poems to glorify male figures.⁶² While I draw attention to Norman’s assumptions of masculinity as normative, it is my aim to avoid those assumptions myself. The closing stanza in Tennyson’s poem asks the reader ‘[w]hen can their glory fade?’ which exhibits a similar sentiment to Norman’s penultimate stanza:

Who can forbid that prayers be said?
Or carols changed for the dead?
Or disbelieve that they shall rise
on angels pinioned to the skies? (‘Amina Negroes’)
Fog Olwig (1999) elaborates more explicitly the fabled conclusion to the revolt

that Norman commits to verse when she describes the local legend that ‘the rebels chose death by throwing themselves over a cliff rather than allowing themselves to be recaptured’ (373). Fog Olwig points out that this particular slave revolt has become a source of islander pride as a counter narrative by demonstrating a tradition of self-determination and assertion (1999: 373). The revolt is increasingly revisited in the arts subsequent to Norman, having been interpreted through drama⁶³ and dance⁶⁴ by Saint Johnians and this collective and communal memory has ensured that Fortsberg fort and

⁶² Much has been written about Siegfried Sassoon’s war poetry, which Patrick Campbell characterises as often taking the form of pastoral elegies to dead comrades (1999 :156).

⁶³ The play *Pillsbury Sound* was written by Carla Sewer and performed in Saint John in 1995.

⁶⁴ In 1996, dance troops from the United States Virgin Islands and Ghana traveled to Copenhagen for a major interpretive production.

premises remains one of the few parcels of land with historical importance to remain in local hands as opposed to the National Parks.⁶⁵

These elements of fraternity and resistance seem to solidify this particular event as worthy history for a categorically disenfranchised people to take hold of, and since Mary Point, Saint John (the cliff from which the vanquished Amina warriors are said to have leapt to their watery deaths) is in such proximity to Tortola as to be in plain view regardless of weather, Norman's desire to share in this specific moment as a celebration of physical resistance to oppression is mirrored in his other works which celebrate the transformation of the islands' black citizens from enslaved people to land owners, from disenfranchised to active political members of their society. One such text that charts this transformation is 'The British Virgin Islands Negro'. In it, Norman assumes an almost celebratory tone from its beginning, echoing a cessation of the oppression wrought on the body by slavery represented by the literal burial of the white planter:

No longer rise the wails of woe
No longer bleeds the dark Eboe
The planter's shell has ceased to sound
The massa's in the cold cold ground. ('The British Virgin Islands
Negro')

There is however, a fundamental difference between the success that Norman specifies the 'British Virgin Islands Negro' possesses versus the plight of the insurrectors on Saint John. The population of whites hovered between 1200 and 1300 for a century

⁶⁵ About two-thirds of Saint John, an island of just over 50 square kilometers, was purchased by the United States Virgin Islands government and repurposed as the Virgin Islands National Park in 1956. The purchase was largely facilitated by millionaire Laurence Rockefeller having previously bought up extensive swaths of land in Saint John, Virgin Gorda, and Puerto Rico. As a result of the explosion of tourism and American investment in the 1950s and 1960s, the livable areas outside of the national park have become overcrowded. The unavailability of land for native Saint Johnians has been coupled with the annual population augmentation of mostly wealthy and white continentals (mainland Americans) forcing many of the locals to move to Saint John or Saint Croix or further afield to the United States (Fog Olwig, 1999).

prior to the Emancipation Act, and from 1834 onward began to plummet dramatically⁶⁶ leaving just 32 in the entire territory by 1891. Vernon Pickering (1987) attributes this to a period of general ‘decline and disorder’, but the decline could be blamed on a myriad of natural disasters and (according to Lewisohn)⁶⁷ at least one wave of departures was brought on by the fear of rebellion on Tortola. More likely, the severe drought that persisted for almost ten years between 1837 and 1847 coupled with several severe hurricanes striking the islands in 1819, 1837, 1842, 1852, 1867, and 1871 made the two main crops of sugar and cotton unsustainable (Harrigan and Varlack, 1987: 10). Most planters had mortgaged heavily against their estates and found it difficult to recover from each unforeseen catastrophe. Thus defeated, many estates were sold, some were lost to unpaid taxes, and still more were abandoned having been destroyed by hurricane. The formerly enslaved, once freed, usually remained on the plantations they had worked on for generations which now provided a small wage as well as clothing and housing. These circumstances demonstrated the impracticality of the plantocracy being supported by anything other than free labour, while allowing Norman less than one hundred years later to declare that in the British Virgin Islands, ‘[t]he Black is lord of land and sea / And title-deeds assert his right’ (‘The British Virgin Islands Negro’).

Norman however inhabits a peculiar duality. Firstly, he enjoys the privilege of being able to use his work to speak back to the coloniser in a manner similar to Caliban’s retort to Prospero: ‘You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse’.⁶⁸ Building on the celebration of the Saint John rebellion - an event in which 40 white men, women, and children were killed – the white colonial ‘massa’

⁶⁶ Demographic statistics compiled by Norwell Harrigan and Pearl Varlack in *Ye Yslands of Enchantment* (1988) show an overall decline in population over the 1800s, but in 40 years the white population went from 1300 in 1805 to 200 in 1844 while the population of blacks declined from 9220 to 6489 in the same period. No statistics exist between 1844 and 1891.

⁶⁷ Lewisohn makes this claim without reference.

⁶⁸ Shakespeare. *Tempest*. 1.2.517.

figure is the focus of much of 'Negro' as a contrast to the autonomy being enjoyed by Norman and his contemporaries:

No longer crack the driver's whips
His sons go down to sea in ships
He never feels the oppressor's hand
His sons are owners of the land.

No more he bows to lords he meets
His chariot rages in the streets
No more his plaintive beggar's plea
He orders on both land and sea. ('The British Virgin Islands Negro')

Simultaneously however, Norman seeks to embrace, identify with, and even claim ownership of the British construction of empire. Despite ending the previous stanza with the line '[f]or Hodge's⁶⁹ slave is Belle Vue's lord', he writes in the next stanza that '[h]is empire's battles he has fought / 'Gainst Prussian horde and Hottentot'. There appears to be a strident dissonance between the actual enslavement by the white colonials present on the island and the philosophical commitment to the idea of the British Empire symbolised by the distant crown. After Emancipation, some Virgin Islanders chose conscription in the West India Regiment and travelled to Jamaica for training. The most famous Virgin Islander to do so was Samuel Hodge.

According to Jeffrey Green⁷⁰, in 1867, following the end of the Second Anglo-Ashanti War in Ghana⁷¹, Samuel Hodge of Tortola was awarded the Victoria Cross for his exertions in a conflict with Marabout⁷² leader Amar Faal and his followers at Tubabecolong in Gambia. Hodge was a member of the 4th battalion of the West Indian

⁶⁹ 'Hodge' refers to the notoriously brutal Arthur William Hodge who was tried and hanged in 1811 for the murder of the enslaved man Prosper. According to John Andrew (2000), Hodge's defense hinged upon the claim that the charge of murder was invalid as Prosper was property.

⁷⁰ Green has posted this information on his personal website from his corresponding entry in the *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography* edited by Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates and forthcoming from Oxford University Press in 2016.

⁷¹ The West India regiments were stationed across the western coast of Africa in British territories from 1853 (Ellis, 1885: 229).

⁷² Marabouts were Islamic leaders and teachers who began to make their way down the River Gambia into areas controlled by the British.

regiment made up of black Caribbean men stationed in Gambia under Lieutenant Colonel George D'Arcy in July of 1866. The West Indian soldiers joined with Soninke⁷³ warriors and marched on Tubabecelong, which was well fortified with wooden walls. Colonel D'Arcy and his officers Lieutenant Jenkins and Ensign Kelly along with fifteen of the men of the West India regiment volunteered to storm the walls with axes. The officers and all but two of the regiment men were either killed or incapacitated, leaving Hodge and another infantryman Private Boswell to assist D'Arcy to get through the stockade. Boswell was soon shot dead, leaving Hodge to hack open the gates to allow the remaining troops into the village. While doing so, Hodge was critically injured. By January, he was awarded the medal while stationed in Belize, where he would later die from complications of the injuries sustained in Gambia. Tragically, his grave in Belize was unmarked and his medal was never recovered (Metzgen and Graham: 80).⁷⁴ At the time, and indeed into the 1980s as evidenced by notes in *Ye Yslands*, it was believed that Hodge was the first black man to receive the Victoria Cross. This would have been Norman's impression and those lines are clearly his honouring of the Virgin Islanders who served in both the Napoleonic Wars against the 'Prussian horde' as well as those who fought in Africa.

This recurring theme of those who were slaves now finding themselves in control of their own destinies and in ownership of their own land in the hundred years between emancipation and Norman's day may gloss over what has been recorded historically as consistently desperate economic depression for most of the territory's residents. His poem 'The Present As History' (see Appendix One: Fig. 6) is dedicated to the eerie separation from the past created by the desertion of the territory by the Crown

⁷³ The Soninke tribal warriors hailed from Ghana and reinforced the attack on Faal as local leaders also resisted the incursions of the Marabout.

⁷⁴ Metzgen and Graham also note that Hodge's unmarked grave was most likely destroyed during a road project and that his medal would be worth approximately \$400,000 US dollars today.

and white planter families. Most of the historical texts, specifically by Dookhan, Pickering, and Harrigan, agree on the main elements that created this new reality. The attitudes of the white authorities was that the members of the emancipated black population were content and happy enough as seen in the following extract from the Presidential report of 1845:

The mass of the people are not exposed to unusual suffering as they are enabled with their provision grounds and their stock, for the raising of which the Virgin Islands offer great facilities, to adequately satisfy their necessities, although the want of money wages may compel them to abandon some of the comforts and enjoyments of life which were accessible to them when their pecuniary resources were less contractive. (*Annual Reports of the President, 1845-1888*)

Harrigan and Varlack contextualize the insurrection of 1853 in the reactions following the imposition of a tax on cattle that disproportionately targeted the black rural members of the community. Coupled with the unwise timing of the tax enforcement that began on August 1, 1853 – the nineteenth anniversary of Emancipation – unrest could not be far away. Rural black planters assembled on that day in the capital Road Town to protest, but the colonial authorities broke up the assembly with violence and arrested two of the planters. Riots ensued. Many of the great houses in Road Town were burned down along with cane fields and sugar works, magistrates and constables were assaulted, leading most of the white population to escape to Saint Thomas by August 3, 1853. The insurrection was ended by the arrival of Danish troops from Saint Thomas and British troops from Antigua, followed by the execution of three of the ringleaders and the imprisonment of twenty others. This effectively marked the end of Tortola and the Virgin Islands as a viable sugar plantocracy. Few whites returned to their estates, and those that did faced an expensive and extensive rebuilding process. Despite the upheaval caused by the cattle tax, new taxes continued to be introduced and the economy continued to decline (Harrigan and

Varlack, 1975: 65). In a generation the only whites resident were those in colonial office.

Norman for his part, characterises the missing white population in a ghostly ethereal manner; they ‘have vanished like the dew’. Intriguingly, he couches that disappearance first in their absence from the military embattlements of the main island:

Fort Charlotte’s guns are silent now,
Fort George’s flag is down;
No sentry guards Fort Shirley’s brow,
Defenseless is Road Town. (‘The Present as History’)

This focus suggests the presence of colonial whites is positioned as military authority, a source of violence exacted upon black bodies, but ironically as protection of those same black bodies from other European powers. There is a trace of nostalgia in Norman’s lines as well as a desire to frame the history of the islands in military terms. When that is combined with his reliance on metres and forms that hearken to Victorian English poets, Norman’s work begins to coalesce into a poetic effort to legitimize both Virgin Islands history and verse through distinctly English aesthetic standards. From that perspective, the sea remains symbolic of nature untamed, a chaotic force that must be navigated on its own unpredictable terms. Through the poems that are available, the sea’s power as an uncontrollable, elemental force is highlighted. In ‘Amina Negroes’, the Akan brave the waters of the Atlantic as the enslaved; their passage a metaphor for the bondage they have entered into before they sacrificed themselves to the sea when faced with defeat. ‘Horseshoe’s Reefs’, ‘Loss of the *HMS Valerian*’, and ‘Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*’ all reinforce this interpretation of the ocean but still present it as a wildness that must be entered and braved, a loose metaphor for life.

Norman has not enjoyed the territorial acclaim and attention he certainly deserves, and several writers emerged locally between the times in which he wrote and the 1990s who have had a platform to write, be recognized, and be recorded for

posterity. The most prolific of these were Quincy Lettsome, Jennie Wheatley, Roy Hodge, and Verna Penn Moll. Of those writers, Penn Moll published the most frequently in international journals and of all of them most demonstrates a concern with the sea that goes beyond the visual. In essence, the sea appears in Penn Moll's work with the same spiritual vibrancy it exhibits in the preceding poets; as an expression of nature's power as well as a provider and sustainer of coastal communities.

Penn Moll has long been a stalwart of the public service in the British Virgin Islands, spending most of her working career as Chief Librarian of the Road Town Library having begun her adult life in primary education. Her writing career encompassed two collections of poetry, a novel, two tourist-minded guidebooks – one about the wider Virgin Islands, and the other about St. Kitts and Nevis, and most recently a collection of essays. It is difficult to access these books today outside of private collections, undoubtedly a result of their having been self-published at considerable personal expense. The reality that the population cannot support large-scale production of books has led to the reliance on vanity presses, and almost all of the titles published by local authors are so produced.

Penn Moll's writing however, benefits from what appears to be her aims at a wider audience, as well as a poetic sensibility that is clearly built on the reading of Caribbean poetry. That sensibility is often turned to the sea, and while Penn Moll is likewise invested in ancient and classical mythologies, unlike Norman, the sea for her often represents something quieter. In the opening poem of *Legacy* (1997), 'Pelican Dive' (Appendix Two: Fig. 1), the sea is presented as the center around which a fishing village is built. The sea here operates as bounteous provider, sustaining the village with food as well as commerce when the pelican's dive alerts the fishermen to 'where fishes

beat / in schools' (Penn Moll, 1997: 3). The sea's vibrancy imbues the village with a fertility that extends to foliage as well:

periwinkles smother weeds
along the roadside;
While the spreading
bougainvillea
ignores drought. (3)

Penn Moll reveals her sentimentality here. She presents this fertility as having been born from the fishermen's willingness to sit and watch for where the pelican dives in order to inform their exertions. She begins the poem by framing it as flashback to 'the land of my youth' and she suggests here (and elsewhere in this collection) that our modernity or our haste has removed an ability to listen and observe nature in ways that allow man to benefit. She hearkens back to a simpler way of life in the islands, presenting the familiar image of the conch shell being blown at the end of the poem to announce the success of the catch. The desire to frame the sea as creative and fertile continues in the poem that follows 'Birth' (Appendix Two: Fig. 2): 'From its interior / mountains bulged / valleys merged' (Penn Moll, 1997: 4). These poems are enough to illustrate her distinction from Norman on the grounds that Penn Moll is concerned with nature in general and humanity's indebtedness and responsibilities to it than she is with recorded history and perceiving her poems as exercises in recording history themselves. This view is reinforced by her latest publication – a book of collected essays, many of which focus on environmental concerns.⁷⁵ What the poems point to however, is a pastoral imagining of the British Virgin Islander way of life as well as a nostalgia that, when examined, suggests that these recent memories of her youth are in danger of being effaced from the collective consciousness of the islands.

⁷⁵ *This Land: A Trust from God* (2014) gathers together a series of essays which further an Christian argument of humanity's place as stewards of the environment

This nostalgic theme is repeated shortly after in ‘The Fisherman’s Nets’ which follows the work of village fishermen in ‘the wee hours after three’ seine fishing for cavalli⁷⁶ to take to market. The poem for the most part concerns itself with documenting the process of the work:

A heavy evening haul
late for market
netted and pegged
the catch near shore
in the crawl
for cold storage. (Penn Moll, 1997: 5)

This approach to these two poems, as present in other sections of this work, amounts to the recording of cultural practices that are centred on seaside life. The sea provides food and fuels the economy for this unnamed bay area village. As such, it gives life to body, culture, and crucially for Penn Moll here it provides an anchoring sense of self, identity, and belonging. The stanza that follows however, injects some ambiguity while subtly deconstructing and unpacking the suggested serenity of the way of life the rest of the poem illustrates. She begins by insisting that ‘[t]here was another option’, referring to the cold storage of the evening’s catch that is ‘too late’ to be carried to market. The lines that follow though confuse whether she is still just speaking of fish: ‘splitting, gutting, / sea-salt corning’ (1997: 5). The violence that must be routinely exacted on the bodies of the fish cannot help but mirror the kinds of violence exacted upon the bodies of the enslaved.

Furthermore, the subsistence living culture that Penn Moll depicts in these two poems is no longer a reality in the British Virgin Islands. There are very few full-time fishermen remaining as it is increasingly difficult to maintain oneself much less a family given how dramatically local society has changed over the last five decades or so.

⁷⁶ The cavalla or cavalla is more commonly known as the crevalle jack, a large reef fish common to the region.

Firstly, the business of fishing has been commercialised and regulated in ways that exclude the subset of society that would have seen fishing as a viable occupation. Commercial fishing licenses according to the Conservation and Fisheries Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Labour are granted to those ‘local fishermen’ who ‘catch fish as a means of surviving’ (‘BVI Fishing Licenses’). The license granted allows the use of fish traps, seine nets, hand lines, and fishing rods and as such does not allow trawling or any other method that would dramatically increase the volume of fish that can be caught. This is of course a method of preserving fish populations for sustainability, but also largely inhibits the possibility of much wealth being accumulated by local fishermen. The local fishing complex was established in 1997 (the same year that *Legacy* was published) and serves as a hub where most local fishermen deliver their catch as opposed to the practice of going to market articulated in the poem. Fishermen receive money for their whole catch and the Fishing Complex then distributes to supermarkets, restaurants, and the public. Despite this arrangement, the territory is inevitably moving towards a heavier reliance on the importation of fish as opposed to supporting the maintenance of small-scale fishing in the coastal villages (‘I Met a \$50K Contract to Import Fish – Pickering; Says They are Now Only Buying Locally’). It is clear then, that the communal practice of fishing as Penn Moll portrays it in her work is one from communal memory.

The memory of village fishing that Penn Moll constructs in ‘Pelican Dive’ and in ‘The Fisherman’s Nets’ revolves around the sea as a metaphysical force of creation and the symbiotic relationship that islanders maintain with it. The suggestion then, is that while the quiet paradisaic images she presents are accessible via her memory and point towards efforts for locals to retain cultural histories and traditions, there are elements of these images that may problematically align too perfectly to Western

consumerist images of the Caribbean to the casual reader. The British Virgin Islands remain constructed as a tourist's paradise, a place that they can *discover* removed from the common beaten path for visitors to the Caribbean, an *unspoilt* Eden. The local Tourist Board actively campaigns along these lines, and this attitude can be gleaned from a glance at their logo (See Appendix Three). Most of this appeal depends on the territory remaining largely under and undeveloped, and as such while opposition to large scale developments tend to be made on environmental grounds at first, the clamour to keep the landscape undisturbed for reasons housed in a particular brand of tourism often emerges (Oakes, 1992). For example, in a satirical article on the mooted expansion of the Terrance B. Lettsome Airport on Beef Island,⁷⁷ British hotelier and restaurateur Ben Bamford writes the following:

It's time for the people of the VI to think outside the box. The tired old formula of low impact tourism, pristine beaches and stunning natural beauty is no longer any fun for us oligarchs. ('Oligarch')

Bamford is also the owner of the Last Resort Hotel and Restaurant which is situated on cay in Trellis Bay that would be directly affected by the noise emanating from the airport expansion and from the jets that may land afterwards. Bamford, and others to be fair, appears to be able only to frame the value of direct transatlantic flight through the prism of tourism. Furthermore, his suggestion that refraining from making the British Virgin Islands easier to get to is a demonstration of a commitment to 'low impact tourism' and a continuation of the marketing of the islands as a discoverable tropical paradise (nature's little secrets) ignores the question – upon whom is the impact

⁷⁷ The territory's main airport is located on Beef Island and connected to the main island of Tortola by Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. Currently, the largest aircraft servicing the territory is the 50 passenger de Havilland Dash 8 aircraft flown by LIAT and Seaborne airlines as well as Seaborne Airlines' 36 passenger Saab 340. In 2012, the Deputy Premier Dr. Kedrick Pickering presented two potential multi-million dollar expansion plans that would expand the landing strip from under 4,000 feet to just over 6,000 in order to facilitate landing a 467 passenger Boeing 747 (O'Connor: 2012).

minimal? While ‘stunning natural beauty’ is undoubtedly one of the attractions that drives Caribbean tourism economies, who benefits from the resistance to development?

What Penn Moll recognises is that today’s British Virgin Islands is no longer that ‘land of her youth’. The enormous growth in population in the last fifty years (about 400 per-cent between 1960 and 2007), was largely fuelled by immigrants working in the tourism and financial services industries and has created a society that is less than two-fifths local.⁷⁸ Through British naturalisation laws for overseas territories that seek to restrict access to British citizenship, citizenship of the British Virgin Islands is denoted by the term *belonger*, which identifies individuals granted a series of permissions and rights accessible only to immigrants like Bamford with considerable financial security and independence. The reality that belongers presently find themselves a minority in their own country makes the opening line of ‘Pelican Dive’ resonate differently: ‘In the land of my youth’. In this regard, while Penn Moll’s youth still belongs to her memory, the land of her youth has shifted about into something that no longer resembles the scene she has constructed.

Penn Moll’s use of the sea is engaged with history throughout *Legacy*, but the sea appears in these interactions in two distinct ways. In ‘Birth’, Penn Moll presents islands as the progeny emerging from the sea, and this conceit begins a sequence of poems in which the sea is an almost cosmic force. The same image begins ‘Connections’: ‘the lashing sea, / heaving, giving / islands’. This construction presents the sea in the context of the islands’ geological history, but simultaneously, the sea’s personification as ‘lapping’ acknowledges the sordid tradition of abuse established

⁷⁸ In the British Virgin Islands, ‘local’ refers to either belongers or BVI Islanders. Put simply, belongership can be attained via naturalization or marriage but does not entitle one to carry a BVI passport. BVI Islanders, on the other hand, are entitled to their status and passports by their birth of at least one of their grandparents in the territory. Bill Maurer (1996) provides an excellent overview of the concept of belongership for the layperson while situating it within a discussion of identity politics.

during slavery. The poet similarly straddles these two histories in ‘The Knowing Pool’, where she invokes many of the same healing properties that are seen in the bathing trope examined earlier in Lorna Goodison’s work:

Bathe me in the sultry Sea
and preserve me in its wisdom
let its waves pour o’er me
its healing charms
and property. (Penn Moll, 1997: 8)

Here however, as opposed to Goodison’s narratives and recollections, the poet actively instructs a figure external to the poem. Each stanza begins with an increasingly elusive command – ‘Bathe me’, ‘Steep me’, ‘Sail me’ (Penn Moll, 1997: 8) - and suggests a quasi-religious rite in the bath she demands – a baptism of sorts from which she will emerge with the knowledge and cultural authority to assume a griot-like role for the sea to ‘re-tell its stories / its myths, its truths / its legends’ (1997: 8).

To say the sea is ubiquitous in island life is a clichéd yet desperately accurate statement. On most of the islands in this formation, it is very difficult in the outdoors to lose sight or smell of the ocean. It dominates the vista and the smell of sea spray travels far inland. Given the inability to ignore the sea and the sentiment of much of her poetry, viewing the sea as a sort of recorder of history and tradition seems the most appropriate summary of the poet’s intentions regarding the sea and its value to her. To my knowledge, this is the first doctoral thesis exploring the work of these two Caribbean poets as well as the first to examine in any depth the work of any British Virgin Islands literary figure. It is interesting that both poets, who as far as I know never met in life, approach the sea with a desire to document different histories through the perspective of man’s relationship with it. It is the same approach in general that each of three poets of the canon have taken as well as the one that I have chosen to embrace with my own poetic explorations of the sea and its many histories in this quieter corner of the

Caribbean. They therefore establish a context for my own poetry to be examined against, and at the same time uncover new terrain with which Caribbean poetry can be more inclusively explored.

A Critical Preface to *Make Us All Islands*

AN OVERVIEW OF THE COLLECTION

Make Us All Islands is separated into three sections: ‘Cross of the Griot’, ‘Her Iron Cable Rent’, and ‘Eyes Heavy as Anchors’ forming a whole collection that has at its root the interrogation of the identities of the British Virgin Islands via the sea. The sections are divided on the basis of their respective content and inspirations. The sea is central to the entire collection, as it is to the critical work, and the poetry is explicit in its questioning of the various roles the sea plays in its interactions with history and the body. The first section, taking its title from the section’s first poem, is focused on historical narratives prior to 1900 mainly on the island of Tortola involving enslaved peoples and the liberated Africans – a diverse group of people who were rescued from various slavers which either wrecked or were captured in the territory’s waters after the British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The second section, titled with a line from Alphaeus O. Norman’s ballad ‘The Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*’, takes as its focus the decades at the beginning of the 20th century, when many Virgin Islanders left the islands to find work in Panama, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. The final section concerns itself with issues of identity within the personal in contemporary times and is inspired by the ways the body occupies an island environment dense with history.

The collection’s first section, ‘Cross of the Griot’, begins with a series of fragmentary information about the ships of historical relevance to the establishment of the liberated African community of Kingstown, east of Road Town, Tortola. The formal techniques are inspired in part by the Chamoru poet Craig Santos Perez’ series of *from unincorporated territory* poetry collections.⁷⁹ In those poems, Santos Perez utilises various typographical effects to signify citations, quotations, and other interruptions of

⁷⁹ *from unincorporated territory [hacha]* (2008); *from unincorporated territory [saina]* (2010); and *from unincorporated territory [guma’]* (2013).

voice to create alternate readings of material that possesses familiar cultural references for readers from the United States.

The liberated Africans were captive peoples on private slavers who were in transit to lives of enslavement when those vessels were captured or rescued by the British navy after Great Britain had abolished the slave trade but before emancipation. The first epigraph refers to the first instance after the abolition of the slave trade of the British Navy capturing a slaver in the waters of the British Virgin Islands. A brief paragraph attributed to John Dougan, Esq.⁸⁰ in *The London Gazette* of December 1810 records the following:

Notice is hereby given, that an Account of Bounty Money arising from the Capture of the Schooner *Nancy*, Viall, Mofier, on the 31st October 1807, by His Majesty's Ship *Cerberus*, William Selby, Esq; Captain; is lodged in the Registry of the High Court of Admiralty. (*The London Gazette*, 1810).

These fragments appear on individual pages and are meant to give the appearance of epitaphs or entries in a shipping registry or ports of entry. The second fragment lists four Spanish slavers (the *Venus*, the *Manuela*, the *Atrevido*, and the *Candelaria*) captured between 1814 and 1815 and attempts to present the numbers of West African captives as an entry of cargo to be accounted for. That accounting takes place in the lines below the total in the categories of 'cargo', 'apprenticed', 'west indies regiment', 'dead', and 'unknown'. Of the 1,318 people trapped on board, a staggering 470 died before British capture (Colonial Department). The reason for the detachment provided by the form of the epitaph is to provide a contrast to the emotional register which operates in the poetry of this section. The fragments that follow are pulled from correspondences by Charles Maxwell (the then Governor of the Leeward Islands),

⁸⁰ At the time of publication, Dougan was a prize agent in Tortola paying out bounties for captured vessels. Years later, Dougan held the post of Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of Captured Negroes in the West Indies with the Colonial Office. He died prior to his report being delivered to the House of Commons (Colonial Department, 1828: 2).

Robert Claxton (the Collector of Customs), and Robert Schomburgk (a German explorer touring the islands). Both Maxwell and Claxton callously condemned the African survivors of the various captured and wrecked slaveships to what effectively became a segregated space and land too infertile to sustain them.⁸¹ Schomburgk, a naturalist most famous for discovering orchids and giant water lillies, came face to face with the inhumanity and evil of the slave trade in his notes on observing the recently sunken Spanish slaver the *Restauradora* on Anegada's Horseshoe Reef (177).⁸² The quotes from these documents are partially redacted to create a disjointedness and disconnection from the history and to avoid that history weighing down the form and expression of the poems that follow. The final two epigraphs, which complete the chronological sequence of events, focus on the establishment of the St. Philip's Church or The Church of the Africans and the lack of willingness on the part of the colonial government to assist the community of liberated Africans in maintaining the structure of the church.

Early on in the construction of the collection, the subscription to a classic form was an attractive proposition, but ultimately the diversity of voices and subject meant that a diversity of form was necessary. The early poems then operate as a response to these written correspondences, records, and to the religious and cultural assimilation represented by the church's establishment. For this to be effective, I believe it is necessary to reclaim voice and the ability for the people in question to speak for themselves – even if, lacking historical records, those voices must be reimagined. To do that, I first utilise the religious and spiritual power of the griot. In 'Griot' I attempt to

⁸¹ This information is taken from correspondence between Maxwell and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir George Murray as recorded in the House of Commons Papers, Vol. 19. In them, Maxwell states that he contacted Claxton 'to ascertain if [the Africans] could be settled near Road Town [but] at a sufficient distance to keep them out of it'.

⁸² Schomburgk's writes that his experience witnessing three shipwrecks in the space of a few weeks inspired him to map the Horseshoe Reef (1832: 155). Peter Riviere's essay in *Archives of Natural History* argues a slightly different interpretation – that it was the sight of the bodies of Africans still in chains in the submerged hold of the *Restauradora* that changed the course of Schomburgk's career and drove him towards humanitarian goals (1998: 1).

emphasise oral rhythms and rhymes that is embraced in *The Arrivants* but with the appearance of the terza rima form inspired by *Omeros*. Much as in the fragmentary epitaphs that open the section, I utilise the quotation of the formerly enslaved Tortolan elder Abednego⁸³ in italics to interrupt my own contemporary voice. The sequence of poems that follow ('Offering', 'Birth', and 'In The Moment Freedom Comes') recreate the narratives of actual captives on the Spanish slaver *Atrevido*. That boat, which, like the *Restauradora*, wrecked on Horseshoe Reef, provided the greatest initial number of Africans who would form the community at Kingstown. This group of poems conflates West African religions with Judeo-Christian names and rites in an attempt to illustrate the dissonance between the two. For example, the figure of Abednego is presented as a griot character yet he carries a name that summons the biblical figure that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has thrown into a furnace.

With that allusion, the image of the fire's anointing becomes useful as a baptism that reverses and complicates both the meaning of and the position of the sea and water. The sea is presented as something awful and powerful, both destroying the ships and consuming the histories of captor and captive alike. Subverting and problematizing the religious act of baptism is also key here. The power and spiritual relevance of the elements of fire and water have to be reversed in a way that captures the incongruence between Christianity and the myriad of faiths of West African peoples forced to convert during the transatlantic slave trade. Fire here grants a vocal power to the griot figure whereas water becomes representative of the hell that has been endured during the Middle Passage. Thus, water does not grant the new life wished for in this baptism but instead subjugates the African subject in the New World in a second, different way.

⁸³ Abednego's quote appears as an epigraph at the beginning of John Andrew's *The Hanging of Arthur Hodge* (2000), a book that has become an important text for Virgin Islands history. It is as follows: 'In slavery days, the black man's life count for nothing'.

The next sequence of poems begins with ‘The Talking Stone’, which is dedicated to local historian and poet Patricia Turnbull who has worked for years collecting the records surrounding St. Philip’s Church and the settlement at Kingstown. That poem and others experiment with the effect of form on meaning and interpretation. In particular, that poem (and others) are composed on the page to engage in a deliberate typographical manner to suggest differing voices and other interruptions. As ‘The Talking Stone’ is concerned with the process of surveying and measuring out of the land that was set aside for the liberated Africans but was not arable, the breaks and the spacing between words varies in ways to suggest these dualities and contradictions. The spacing also gives the appearance at times of redaction which is a recurrent effect from the actual redactions that are included in the earlier fragments. The first three parts of ‘The Heavy Anchor’ series appear here – the anchor and the ship are tropes that connect the three sections – as does one of the two ‘fisherman’ poems which are a direct allusion to Brathwaite’s own fisherman character in the first part of ‘Littoral’ in *Islands*. The sequence poem ‘Proverb’ also begins in this section with two Akan proverbs. These poems are included here in order to provide a stylistic break from the heaviness of the content and to act as a prelude to the last sequence of poems in this section which offer a perspective more removed from the violence acted upon the bodies of the enslaved before the harshness of the images presented in the closing poem ‘Prosper’s Storm’. That poem reimagines the murder of Prosper – a young man enslaved on the island of Tortola – by the order of slaveowner Arthur Hodge.

The second section begins with an epigraph from the poem by Alphaeus O. Norman that gives it its title before engaging in a similar fragmentary exercise to that which opened the collection. These fragments come from a narrower selection of historical events, beginning with Emancipation leading through the seasonal work

migrations at the turn of the century up to the wreck of the *Fancy Me*, still the worst maritime disaster in the territory's history. This section begins with a brief narrative poem of separated lovers that attempts to capture a sense of rural life on the island of Tortola in the early parts of the twentieth century before reconnecting with 'The Heavy Anchor'. Here, the fourth and fifth sections are explicitly focused on the stories of the Virgin Islanders who had travelled to the Dominican Republic for work and in the case of the fifth section, survived the *Fancy Me*. The first of these two sections borrows from Brathwaite's tone and rhythm while the second juxtaposes the musical Creole voice of the survivor Baptist George with a more rigid and stoic poetic voice. 'Cutter Song' immediately follows and fully embraces Virgin Islands Creole as well as some more explicitly musical rhythms and rhyme sequences in an attempt to recreate a small mythology around the men and women living in the Dominican Republic during cane season. There are very few primary documents in the public domain that provide any sort of narrative of the lives of those transient people during this era, and as such much reliance ends up being placed on the scant paragraphs in the few historical texts and whatever oral history has subsisted within families.⁸⁴ Norman's poetry, with its various mythological references seeks to elevate these sorts of experiences and narratives to a mythic level of importance in the BVI Islander's psyche, while the poems in this section attempt to create its own myths with a much more mundane sense of what life in the fields of La Romana and San Pedro de Macoris might have been like. With few exceptions, this section focuses on the body and work of the poor and working class Virgin Islander, and in that respect the poetry draws some minor influence from Walt Whitman in its attempts at finding the language that simultaneously remembers and

⁸⁴ There is some ancillary scholarship by Dominican cultural scholars and historians that addresses the *cocolos* tangentially – for example the work of Emilio Betances and Jose Del Castillo referenced in this thesis – but Virgin Islander perspectives have not been published in the same manner.

celebrates both the body and the worlds it moves through.⁸⁵ I was also keen to include narratives that capture that working life as well as the familial connections that Virgin Islanders built in the Dominican Republic as a counterbalance to the negative perceptions that linger about Dominican nationals resident in the Virgin Islands ('Report: Dominican Republic nationals problematic to VI'). Other poems hint at ancestral memories being contained by nature and other natural elements or search for parallels between the movement of water through land and the body in a sequence focused on a cholera epidemic.

The title of the final section, 'Eyes Heavy As Anchors', comes from Derek Walcott's poem 'The Sea is History'. I chose this line because, while this title implied the weight of the Caribbean's maritime histories, I wanted this section to reflect how those histories haunt the individual in everyday and mundane rituals. As such, the first poem 'At the Waterside' begins with the speaker in the littoral scene of the ferry dock, which is deliberately reminiscent of the *Fancy Me*. The language and the imagery is meant to echo across the three sections, as seen in the case of the returning of the sargassum seaweed. The seaweed typically originates in the Sargasso Sea in the North Atlantic before being spread by oceanic currents throughout the Caribbean. Aside from the unseasonably large blooms that have flooded through the region over the past few years, the image of the sargassum floating in the British Virgin Islands' waters acts not just to link the contemporary scenes of 'At the Waterside' to the poems in the first section that portray the arrival of the liberated Africans, but also as a symbolic gesture towards tidalectics and the role of the ocean's currents in transporting various people to

⁸⁵ Initially, the creative section took on an impersonal and historical tone which I felt was too narrative (for example, poems like 'The Fisherman Measures Life'), and while that was not necessarily a negative consequence, it did not always capture the emotion that the subject matter demanded. The Whitman influence therefore, led to me writing poems like 'Corpse', which sought a more direct conversational address of the reader.

these shores. 'At the Waterside' is evocative of some of the rhythms in Walcott's work, especially the quasi-sonnets in his last collection *White Egrets* (2010).

The poem also uses an examination of seascape and landscape to contrast the impact of the tourism industry on the environment. Most of the remaining poems remain on the coast, with a speaker who engages the environment and the sea almost meditatively as a method of psychologically and spiritually resolving the place of the history studied in the first two sections.⁸⁶ The poems that do not muse on the sea tend to be portraits of elders in the community and traditional and folk work rituals of domino playing, juice making, and bush tea.

The poems included constantly return to the sea as a source of history, but also of death and transformation. Ships appear often alongside the sargassum seaweed as indices of both literal migrations along the Atlantic's currents and the tidalectics of influence that Brathwaite maps in *The Arrivants*.

The landscape of the islands is also important as a contrasting environment from which to examine the sea. The land mirrors man's more permanent interruptions of nature as trees form colonnades, stoa, and other architectural structures while hillsides are rusted in the summer's heat. The use of those architectural and sculptural descriptors conflated with the natural environment is meant to juxtapose man's presence through art, architecture, and industry. What I attempt to hint at through this practice is a sort of ambivalence demonstrated by nature towards humanity and history most clearly illustrated by the duplicitous nature of the sea and its currents throughout the collection. For example, the aquatic creatures that swim through the first section do not operate as metaphors that advance any other idea than the utter washing away of these imagined

⁸⁶ The poem 'At the Waterside' is one of the best examples of this. The opening stanza is set near the Road Town Ferry Dock, the speaker watching a ferry come into port. The voice is transported to the same location almost a century before as the ship carrying the *Fancy Me*'s survivors pulls into shore.

sunken objects and bodies of meaning until the poem itself casts its eye upon them. The ‘nervous cloud of silvern fish’ have no regard for the cages they swim through nor do the eels in the sunken *Restauradora* display any reverence for the skeletons trapped inside the ancient wreck.

MAKE US ALL ISLANDS AND THE CANON

In order to begin the journey towards the collection, it was imperative for me to retrace the poetic resonance of the sea in the reconstructed memories in Caribbean poetry via Brathwaite, Walcott, and Brand who make distinctly different use of the sea in their various texts. I also found it necessary to position my work in relation to the work of older poets from the British Virgin Islands for whom the spectres of the sea were important. This led me towards examinations of Norman and Penn Moll to situate their largely unheralded writing against the canonised work of the aforementioned poets. In so doing, I was able to discover many parallel currents across the texts in addition to the sea, namely the centrality of history and folk work. Also, although not enough of Norman’s work survives to make any sweeping statements regarding an overarching poetics or philosophy, Penn Moll is a reader of both Brathwaite and Walcott and consistently presents the sea and the interaction of Virgin Islanders with it in her poetry in ways that remember traditional coastal ways of life in the British Virgin Islands. The celebration of folk traditions and ways of life echoes many scenes in *The Arrivants*. The absence of critical writing focused on poetry by Virgin Islanders made the writing on Norman and Penn Moll more difficult, but the poetry of Norman that survives clearly embraces an affinity to naval and military history and looks to the sea as a similar sort of vault to the one that Walcott describes.

The collection endeavours to take its place alongside the works of the poets examined in this thesis both local and regional as it projects the narratives of the liberated Africans and the migrant BVI Islanders as a quieter and lesser known Caribbean history that still resonates with the broader concerns of Brathwaite, Walcott, and Brand. In terms of the work of Norman and Penn Moll, the work resonates with theirs in both subject and theme to form a trajectory of historical narratives and cultural practices that can hopefully seek out for local poetry a more consistent place in the minds of BVI Islanders while simultaneously bringing their work to the awareness of the wider region's literary community. The poems contained here, while self-referential, are also very influenced by the poets studied in the critical section. Brathwaite's archetypes of the fisherman and the Rastaman are reimagined here in a contemporary BVI setting, as are his West African gods, while other poems invoke the music and jazz rhythms and experimental typography that *The Arrivants* contains. However, those archetypes do not retain the same militancy they house in Brathwaite's trilogy, instead operating as more stoic and pensive characters that use their ritual work to muse the intersections of land/sea and history. In terms of the ways in which the work interrogates or engages with Walcott, numerous poems continue to wrestle with the spectres of history, especially in the final section; the haunting of the past in the psyche of the contemporary Caribbean citizen is a motif that is embraced. I suspect for many Caribbean poets, the shadow of Walcott, especially in American and European spheres is difficult to escape. While his politics remain his own, his ownership of the role of the poet in private reflection is one that I also find joy in. Whereas the poems in the first two sections speak outwards, reclaiming lost voices and attempting to join them to a sort of Caribbean choir, the final section is much quieter and introspective. Lastly, my acceptance of Brand's fluidity of language and her command of the ways that the

intensely personal and intimate can intersect with the history and politics of a place was a strangely liberating thing that informed much of the final section of the collection.

This liberation is responsible for the way that the political bleeds through the personal in the final section in particular in moments in 'At the Waterside' where the speaker, almost as an aside, bemoans the cost of tourism development to both the environmental and cultural history of the islands.

Creative Component: *Make Us All Islands*

Table of Contents

1. Cross of the Griot	168
Griot	176
Offering	177
Birth	178
In the Moment Freedom Comes	179
The Talking Stone	180
The Heavy Anchor	181
The Fisherman Measures Life	184
Proverb: Death's ladder is there for all to climb	185
Proverb: the one who asks questions doesn't lose his way	186
Light Sound Land	187
Landing	188
Kingston	189
Corpse	190
Eshu	191
Prosper's Storm	192
2. Her Iron Cable Rent	193
For those left behind to ponder a hillside	198
The Heavy Anchor	199
Cutter Song	202
The Loss of the Schooner	203
The Fisherman Finds Way	204
Rastaman mix earth & blood	205
Bushing the Pit	206
Proverb: dead man can't carry dead up de hill	207
Proverb: rock stone down river bottom don't know when de sun hot	208
Proverb: nicknames are used in case the Devil comes asking	209
Wind	210
Corpse	211
Blue Runner	212
Echoes	213
Swing	214
Tidings	215
A Type of Draining	216
Kussmaul	217
A Place in the Earth	218
3. Eyes Heavy as Anchors	219
At the Waterside	221
Sea Bath	226
Man Ground	227
The Domino Player	228
Boiling Bush	229
Passionfruit	230
The spider resting on the rafter	231
Beating a stone	232
Mural	233
On the Loss of Lovers	235
All Ways are the Sea	236

Cross of the Griot

/1807/

October 31st

32 gun fifth-rate frigate

HMS Cerberus

captures the

American schooner *Nancy*

cargo of Senegalese
to be sold as slaves

/1814-1815/

Venus, Manuella,

Atrevido, Candelaria

Spanish slavers captured

cargo: 1,318

apprenticed: 425

west indies regiment: 352

dead: 470

unknown: 71.

released

liberated

captured

/1819/

Donna Paula

Portuguese slaver wrecks
on Horseshoe Reef, Anegada
cargo: 235

/1830/

Kingstown proposal

*the cottages they have erected
the industry and quiet demeanour
with a view of encouraging them
they could be settled near Road Town,
sufficient distance to keep them out*

Charles Maxwell

Governor of Leeward Islands

/1831/

Kingstown, subdivided

*It would be an act of justice and
humanity purchase a lot of
wasteland and parcel it out
the Crown the right of possession*

Robert Claxton

Collector of Customs

Restauradora

sinks in shallow water

Anegada

*the clear and calm sea numerous
sharks and barracuta diving in the hold
to tear their share from the bodies*

Robert Schomburgk

German naturalist

/1840/

St. Phillip's built

bury our dead

/1861/
 64 petition
 the Queen.
 Liberated
 African.

*I have to express my regret that I am unable
 to entertain this memorial. It appears to me
 that the Liberated Africans ought by their
 own labour keep their chapel*

His Grace
 Duke of Newcastle

our faith crumbles.

Griot

The African Abednego, tight curls rusting
on his head, cleared his throat and spoke as griots speak.
Gravel shook in his voice like palm fronds rustling.

Every story needs a teller to kindle it,
to keep it burning through light and dark, smouldering
and anointing our heads with the flame's bitterness.

Stories keep light like a fire in the evening,
burning like coal on the tongue of the priestess,
while black saints draped in sargassum sign the old hymns.

The cross of the griot – to speak for the speechless,
to grip the stem of the bone and coral sceptre,
to be mounted, to sing light into the bleakness.

And so, Abednego the griot, the spectre
speaks: *In slav'ry days, the black man's life count for nothing.*
Black limbs fused to the reef praise the breaking slaver,

her wooden cracking cries lost in sea erupting,
her cargo converted by brackish baptism.
The griot drums the ground with his staff. His rusting

head glistens with the sun's anointing. His wisdom
is in long forgotten praise songs, a blank hymnal,
its verses trapped in the holds of divers prisons.

Offering

Wooden ziggurats rot slowly at the bottom
of the columns of this reef.

The slow march of ribbed
barnacles, black tiles in a glittery mosaic,

the cage's rusted lattice, its forgotten aches
are now home to a nervous cloud of silvery fish.

Here Olokun receives his prayers from skeletons,
whether three or three hundred years beside the eels,

in the *Restauradora*, water filled their lungs,
the grey sharks tore red flesh from limbs still
chained their tongues mute from mourning sun and shore.

The ships and their keels are rooted,
their masts like trees planted in the dense sand.

Birth

The knotted spine of the wreck spat Moses out.
A Spanish basket of oak plank and iron bolt
had held him. The slave ship *Atrevido* boarded,

captured by sword and rifle sprinkled with seasalt.
The black prophet lay below deck with the others,
his destiny tattooed crudely on his forehead,

some greeted these English as their deliverers,
but Moses did not see compassion as they fed
them thin porridge in the boxes they kept them in.

When they gave him to a priest, he knew he was dead.
The old man's heavy cross hung, faith chained
to freedom, slave in all but name.

In the Moment Freedom Comes

The *Atrevido* heaved, rocking itself against
The indigo breakers. Ungobo could not stand,
sit up, or roll over in her shackles. Again

she felt the ship rock, hang, then fall. She prayed for land
under her breath, others prayed for death in the deep.
Both broke over the din of the relentless waves

No light crept into the boat's hold. There were no days.
In the blackness, the sailors took as they pleased
but they broke in the night with the ship. She awoke

to the chatter of Spanish in the nothingness -
their tongues excited – then a distant cannon fired.
Iron bolts squealed and rough hands pulled each from below.

Naked and shivering in the dark, Ungobo
could trace another boat in the sea's grey distance.

Night fled like a rising mist, her chains, unbroken,
still hung from her wrists. Standing on the wooden deck
sunlight danced deliriously in the shallows.

The kisses of oars to water came next to her.
The men from the rowboats grunted in gutturals
as they plucked them from the hold like fishermen
clearing their traps. She could taste the salt in the air.

The Talking Stone
for Patricia Turnbull

Consider you

- *all who entertain a serious and reverential regard for the resting place of the departed*

-

land measured in quadrants,

lines on paper -

distinguishing elevation;

boundaries -

where one must and

must not

pass,

measuring

how one may -

and by how much -

rise.

Then consider

raising walls stone

by bloody bleached

stone

within which

you build – family, life,

village.

Then consider

the arc of the hoe and cutlass,

the upturning of hard earth

into dust

only

watered with

salt and blood.

How then

can the calabash

grow?

With what

do we catch our

blessings?

How does

an entire village

disappear?

The Heavy Anchor

i.

The sea breaks over the swirling curls on my
grandfather's head.

His milky teeth gnaw at the shore, his mouth sucks
the perforated coral for salt, water, and air.

Where else but the indigo blue womb of the deep?
Where the records of these dusty rocks write themselves
in shifting sands.

Oars knife the water like spades,
this desert of waves that grows nothing but graves.

With what can we plumb these depths?

What else but this blasted diving
digging gripping anchor

holding history between its jaws?

ii.

Herons needle the shoreline with their stalking feet
 history lies beneath rotting into nothing.
 Each rhythmic wave a cold gesture of erasure
 of the trauma of memory like lashes falling.

Rain falls like a hail of arrows over our heads.
 The conquerors too must have mistook the torrents
 for poisoned bolts shot from the green blur overhead
 when the first drops rattled against their iron morions.

A man must have thought it ignoble to die here
 ankle deep in the mud and muck of the forest,
 hot mocking air sticking to his neck his wounds bare
 and bloodily formed by the blade's crude edges.

iii.

The briny perfume of the sea stirs a reminiscence
of the old hymns that singe our lips

of barks of bastards cleaving the ether,
and the sea's undying roar

of mariner and cargo braving the
unstoppered sky in the corpses of sylvan gods.

The Fisherman Measures Life

Azureous fish dart amidst the gold sargassum
while pelicans crouch like gargoyles above, plotting
their winged ambush. The fisherman's visage bares gums

in a grimace contorted at the blaring sun
as he loosens the thick cord from the mangrove's root,
sits, and considers his vessel for a moment.

The citrine paint had faded, the wood underfoot
bruised and splintering, the hull slick with silt and muck.
The fisherman, like his fish, never plots the route

and so, hands black with oil and work grip the tiller,
the outboard snarls and a pelican shifts his weight.
An urchin's ivory carapace seems to glimmer,

and catches his eye amidst the seaweed's shimmer
and the shore's muddiness. The sea gives and she takes
in equal measures - like the slow moan of the reef's

jagged jaws tearing the hull of Donna Paula,
her heavy planks splintering into private griefs,
black and white hands gripping at air then sea water.

This patch of sun-seasoned blue opens up to him,
the outrigger's nose lifts gently out the water
which erupts behind 'round the diving pelican.

The yellow hull skips along at a sluggish pace,
the fisherman joined by a dagger-beaked seabird
chasing invisible fish in the creamy wake.

"It is much the same on land," the fisherman thought.
Shark suited men sweat and chase American cash
like fishhooks, mouths transpierced with incandescent lures.

The moment the first tug comes at the jaw,
the shudder of the line first taut, then slack again
as they are pulled aboard dumb-eyed with gasping maw.

The first battered buoy appears aglitter with sun,
its rope, entangled with weed and whelk, peels the pot
from the bed, and as its wooden frame comes to view
the cloudy depths dissolve in slippery shadows.

Proverb

i. Death's ladder is there for all to climb

God
fashion man
from mud
and put him
right back
when he
done.

Proverb

ii. *the one who asks questions doesn't lose his way*

a meandering man marooned
on this cracked pebble, an ancient wreck -

a bone in the Atlantic's throat.

a wandering woman waits
on the congress of thrashers in the guava tree -

a chattering sign-post.

Light Sound Land

The wind on the sea is deafening
voices spat in gales lose their way
and scatter

The light on the sea is bending
rays shone splinter and we lose
our sight

The land rises like shaved heads
bowing and shrinking from the
sea's perpetual din.

Landing

A coconut colonnade stands
on the shore watching bodies
disembark,

their hair knotted and uneven,
their limbs too – they walked
like trees do in the wind.

Kingston

If eyes were thrown
over the hill to a village
so named King's Town,
they may expect
to be lost in a lagoon
of quivered cane,
to kiss Obatala's name
for the blessings of rain
and plenty.

But the ears
hear the weight
of Kingston,
and the air's
heaviness does
not hear the
lightness in a
kingdom of dust.

Corpse

So
the body lying prone
in the gritty surf

can
not resist the probing
of sea and sea foam

nor
direct the Atlantic
past its openings

to
some other propitious
and dumb instrument.

No
body lies still as stone
for the groping sea.

Eshu

Elder,
walk these roads
in peace

Elder,
stretch yourself out
in your sleep.

Elder,
your children
are lost

Elder,
their eyes glaze
like the night

watery
blackness pierced
with steel stars.

Eshu,
the blood sings
for you.

Prosper's Storm

for the man whose death hanged Arthur Hodge

On a rusted hillside, old hymns are sung
along the skirt of a field hemmed by cedars.
Below, the seething sea, a shimmering plain,
covers the stoic crypt where fish take communion
from coral bodies.

The sky uncorks with the firing wind
and the gray tamarind, rotted, rattles like chimes.
The broken drum of thunder beats beats the air
in time, drowning the voice of water,
bird, and beast.

Bodies still break in the earth,
rooted weeds in the shallow dirt.
Here the whip opens the back like a blooming flower
untying knotted muscle from bone
the flesh blushing and peeling in pink petals.
Seaweed snakes the currents

the same way his life slips
down his legs and pools in red muck.
The rod holds no comfort for desperate joys,
its twisted grain slipping and sticking
in the horse shit.

When they loose Prosper
from the tree, the evening
gathering like moths,
the fever is already boiling
beneath his blistered skin.

Her Iron Cable Rent

“Before the gale far out to sea
The hapless vessel went.”

“Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*”
- Alphaeus Osario Norman

/1833/
Emancipation

*Whereas divers Persons are holden
in Slavery within divers of His Majesty's
Colonies all such Persons set free*
An Act for the Abolition of Slavery
throughout the British Colonies;

/1853/

Insurrection
labourers protest the
fifty percent tax increase
on cattle.

*They say they goin put head tax on cattle
on Emancipation day!*

dead: 942

cholera

/1884/

men
begin migrating

La Romana
San Pedro de Macoris
'de Land

/1900/
No viable
industry.

*No visible
history.*

/1926/
The Loss
of the schooner
Fancy Me

*I cannot describe to you
the cries of the
poor*

For those left behind to ponder a hillside

The cane sways like brown girls on an August Monday.
One brown girl with thick inky hair and a pale dress

washed by hand too many times tilts her head north-west
from a flat patch of grass on Windy Hill where she

supposed to be watching her father's goats. But now
the sun finds her daydreaming above the cane field,

her fingers twirling a braid tied by a peach bow
on a flat patch of grass. Dreaming about that boy

with almond eyes gone away to 'The Land'. Go
away skin as inky as her hair and breathing

hot on her neck, their sudoric bodies heaving.
Is months now cane season start and not one letter

come from San Pedro with "Betty" write across it.
The Atlantic seethes as it batters the island's

shore again, as if it would sever its anchor
and sail east apologetically across it.

The Heavy Anchor

iv.

For those moments
in the night
when the rustling
makes you

wonder
if it is
breeze or
rain or
souls

being folded over each other

their tears & spit
sprinkling baptism
on lying flesh.

For rum
lingering on lips
& the embers
of words
smoldering on tongues
the flame caught
in your throat
like a bone
or cough.

For the stickiness
of the night
air & the
heaviness of
the pregnant sky.

For the conch
echoing over
broken shores.

For backs that never
fully straighten &
the stick that lies
on the steaming ground.

For
Attibon
old-
man broken.

Your tools
are rusted
iron.

Who is left
to show us the way

to our
golden
Tzion?

V.

Baptist George, survivor of the Fancy Me

A graveyard of bone
 white coral headstones
 line the stony beach of Saona

We went in there Saona that afternoon, an we put the anchor down

and in Road Harbour,

Like this time so, we put down ... put down the anchor down

the sails billow with Saharan winds,
 full of the withering sigh of history
 the rotting husks of shadowy hulks
 mark their place on the horizon,

The more the night come on, the hotter the storm come

never dipping below
 the watery lines of
 our memory.

And the later it come, the more the storm start to rage

The shovel plunges
 as the anchor does
 as the seas turn over in rows
 and wooden gods rise

start to rage ... start to rage

rise

I see them coming to me, I hear them calling me

their hair foaming
 in concentric circles

nobody get where I is ... just myself alone and God

their creaking fingers
 writing in the
 wet sand.

Cutter Song

Is only Spanish we does go
our men rise up out their beds
& cut themselves loose of the islands
when they feel the line tug.

Cutlasses were light in their palms
the cane fall easy like the sun
& sweat, sweat that stain
shirts & sheets & breasts.

It have a coconut man from Kingstown
by the market & you could tell
him you want one & he will pull
it from the ice & make it hop
in his hand while the black blade
refuses to shine in two o'clock sun.

The machete is shadow
& it bite the coconut just so.

The machete is shadow
& it bite she neck just so.

A man must live true
like islands surrounded by
a desert of blue.

We dream in poems
& we wake with
ohs that melt in echoes
like photographs
bleached in the sun.

The Loss of the Schooner

For J. H. Smith and the drowned souls of the Fancy Me

The storm snarls like a fanged beast, the cold biting at
aching fingers. The cutter's eyes, lost in the black,
look through the spray to grip anything floating.

The men's hopeless cries echo and die in the dark,
die surely as they do drowning in stinging salt
wind and black water. The moment before the sun

rises to splatter light on the broken schooner.
The water is still now between the hulk's carcass
and the broken desperate souls on Saona's shore.

What peace can we find in these hours?
I cannot describe to you the cries of the poor people.
The moments in the night when the rustling makes you

wonder if it's breeze or rain or souls folding
over each other, their tears and spit sprinkling
Atlantic baptism over the lying flesh.

On silent Saona, the kindling sky blots itself
against black ink. On the soft sea the schooner lies
disassembled. Last night the winds screamed foreign oaths,

and waves turned over themselves and licked the beach.
Dull eyes fixed on the white horse, the sea's bright ceiling,
a window to lost faith fading in frothing foam.

Dare I dream of Christ in this indigo abyss?
His stone arms are outstretched, barnacled, and shrouded
in blackish green moss. His cheek scarred from a friend's kiss.

Are those arms open as brothers sink in the deep?
Does he close those arms on my sons' comfortless backs?
Or do these open palms fall on shoulders that weep?

Of wife, mother, child, sister watching the small bark
nod apologetically to the harbor?
Bare chested men ambled over rock and coral,

their drying skin seasoned with salt from sea and tears.
Yemalla spat at our sails, pressed the *Fancy Me*
to her bosom, then whispered her love in our ears.

The Fisherman Finds Way

History is as meaningless as heaps of rubble,
or these mossy corpses, prostrate, eager in prayer
and God, the poor carpenter, lonely fisherman

in sweaty toil casting lines that catch only air,
The fisherman stands in his boat
and sees his wake eaten by the sea.

His brown face creases, smoothes, then creases again in
the bright heat. There is no spinning compass, no clear
route home but memory – of rocks, of sand, of gulls

bawling on the beach he measures his life out on
in pounds of iron-eyed grouper, doctor, ol' wife,
for the bright red guts he tosses under the palms

for the starving strays to battle the birds over.
Grains of salt cling to the hair of the copper arm
clutching the black tiller of the outboard motor.

In the reef's dark depths, hulls pass overhead like clouds,
black and ominous, below and above - abyss,
the constant waves rush to meet every crashing bow

and still the fisherman stands pulling in his fish-
pots in burning salt air, pelting rain, until now
turning his boat like a needle pointing the way.

Rastaman mix earth & blood

& seeds with his hands

make something push through the dark soil, make something new.

His graying locks hang in the heat,
he thinks of lands
 his father worked in La Romana, taut sinews

rising in the day's heat,
cutlass in his right hand
the ground beneath soaking in sweat. Blood forms like dew.

On this same hill,
 where cane used to stand
where his mama used to tend his grandfather's goats,

tilt her head north-west,
 to feel the rough winds approach,
to listen, to taste it, to imagine a man

far away in a cane field,
cutlass in his right hand
nothing else left, facing the angry salted coast.

The sun hangs over the rasta's head like a slave,
beneath his sweating brow,
bones of ancestors

bleach in the bitter dirt,
these little relics

his harvest's protectors,

blessing the pick's pilgrimage.

Bushing the Pit

after Winston Molyneaux, coalpit master

First you gather up your guinep, your tamarind, get used
to hearing your axe bawling its songs against their barks.
A man whose job it is to dig the pit takes his grubbing
hoe & makes a depression.

He must know his tool.

Then the man whose job it is to line the runners
descends into the dirt pit to fix them perfectly parallel,
before the wood is stacked for the slow-burning fire
to breathe as we do.

He builds a mound in the ground.

Then the man whose job it is to bush the pit
with coconut palms must know how much to use
for too much will smother the flame, too little will
let the cassie burn to ash.

He cannot afford imperfection.

The man whose job it is to dig the pit
watches the igniting timber

& sees the coal

blushing
in black pots
balanced on blocks.

Proverb

iii. dead man can't carry dead up de hill

Beneath a cracking sky,

a jumbie stands on her grave
pointing at the white-washed stones of the cemetery wall.

Here she must draw up

a femur,
some philanges,
a hip,
and half a jaw-bone
to wield at the laughing night.

Her empty eyes measure the hill

- its steepness, the blindness of its climbing corners –

and the sheer impracticality of her burdens

laid down at its summit,

her shadowy sockets

filled with
the morning's
bleeding
light.

Proverb

iv. rock stone down river bottom don't know when de sun hot

Under the creased concrete bridge,
the ghut trickles a tear. On the slick bank, a rotting rooster rests

wings spread in mocked flight, beak agape in *co*

co

rico

his silent crows echo a perishing dawn *co*

co

rico.

The water runs cool as a penny under the pillow.

The stone smoothed by flood and famine if asked
could tell of slave and tsunami, or of when it was
a rough rock perched on the hillside

and a radiant rooster crowed *co*

co

lo.

Proverb

v. nicknames are used in case the Devil comes asking

Restricted to notarized documents and letters formed cautiously
in black ink, penned by the dictates and spaces of church and state,
steeple and flag,

the Devil knocks on doors with a flick of his tail,
and hisses a name between his forked tongue and perfect teeth.

Wind

In the violet hours, under the palm arcade,
a colony of crows sit with fiery lidless eyes

watching the ethereal sea tumble on,
and the scarred mountains seem to rise,

the trees shudder in a rushing rattle,
a wind moving amongst the bones.

Corpse

The sloping cedar stoa
guards a bird in Icarian rot,
its grubby feathers spread
like the folds of a mother's frock.

Blue Runner

we must learn again
those arts we have forgotten:

how to throw our hands
up in the shape of a candelabra;

the art of paring
a fish from its translucent bones;

how to pull the thin
shimmering spears from our throats.

Echoes

The haze
stretches like some
yawning thing
against the russet sky

smouldering
above the blue

above
the descending rows
of galvanize roofs
the triangular masts
of swaying yachts.

The blackbird
beats the air like a drum
and the island echoes

with
the knowledge that
when hunger gets
inside you
nothing

else

can.

Swing

Under the tamarind tree
grey vines hang like nooses,
swaying in the gentle winds
dying and pendular.

The hurt
sits like a burl
in the throat
knotted
spoiled
dense
groping

gorgeous

when given
the right
varnish.

Tidings

for the 942 who died in the 1853 cholera outbreak

Death come as clear
as a glass of water,
brimming the rim,
wetting the lips with life.

The body swallows
the tide with the rhythm
the shore does
over the sand of the tongue
and its coral mouth.

Pathways run clear
into some place deep
where a secret garden
blooms in the belly.

A Type of Draining

It is a type of draining
we all feel, of a life
desperate to drink
the air outside of
us.

Water parts the flesh
the way it will mountains,
a river pressing for release
ceaselessly coursing its way
back to the sea.

Kussmaul

Death come still as water
clear as glass in the eye

The body exhales its drying prayers
in a heaving sigh.

The souls are buried
as shallow as the night soil

bowels holding only water as
tender as their faith.

The brittle bodies
wrinkle like pharaohs

their eyes and limbs
blue as the waters that birthed them.

A Place in the Earth

The dumb bodies
lie like leaves
in the dirt.

Death drags
the drying lips back
drawing mouths
into snarls

bracing the teeth
against the whistling
flute of the throat.

The living
philosophise
over the bones

while the yellow love
laughs from the trees
above.

Eyes Heavy as Anchors

“Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors
who sank without tombs”

“The Sea is History”
- Derek Walcott

At the Waterside

i.

In the nascent hours of August, the ferry
lurches towards the grey dock through blue-green waters,
adorned with gold sargassum and white-capped tourists.
Black smoke traces the horizon with a finger
while the old boat's engines cough and spit between waves.
The dockers' shouts crack in the ear like buckshot.
The open sky is cyan, without a wisp of white
and yet wet pebbles drizzle the square I sit in.
I think of another ark pulling down its sails,
a crowd of Tortolans eager to see their sons,
and La Diosa del mar, our Lady of the Sea
brothers chained once more in her coral embrace.
This is a rock with no time for her history,
constructing concrete totems where her cedars groan,
leaving nothing for the bananaquits.
Crowded marinas spread where the mangroves drown
filled with reddened wayfarers on catamarans.
Not even the hands on the captain's wheel are brown
when the sea can segregate, make us all islands.
Then the ochre days when the boat pulls into port
I will remember a schooner sailed by brown hands.

ii.

The sea is as black as the night, reflecting
nothing but the island's apathy. The pale masts,
like obelisks unsure of their foundations,
quiver with the tide. A gannet adjusts his wing.
Behind them, blurred lights flicker across the channel.
It is here where the Empire unravels, crumbling
in Ozymandian ruin - preserving only
an ancient anger held by hands burnt black in sun.
The sea grows darker in intention as it laps
at the rough edges of the shore and licks its teeth.
It is here they find me, a smudge on their blue maps.
The mad ocean stretches thoughtlessly before me,
grinding the shore until white foam sits on the water
like ants who have lost their trail and found misery.
The crests of the waves stampede forward and the
hollow growl of the plane over my head begins
to echo off the islands' cliffs like cannonade.
A white gull tucks his head in his breast and answers.
The fisherman's vessel sits still in the reef
at Buck Island. Something greater covers him
at his rest below these rust and green hills
while sparkling blues betray the reef's lying rocks.

iii.

In the dark morning,
a lone white gull untucks his
beak from his breast and calls
mournfully from the cliffs.

The fisherman sits
still in his dugout

something greater
covers him
at his rest

below these
rusted hills.

Great bending sails
cut the blue horizon

splitting the sky
into uneven portions.

Blooming clouds
hang like the

ghosts of slaves.

iv.

The surf choruses salted ritual,
the crescendo of milky waves churn
the shore rolls up and out
below a deserted sky,
a frigate bird is pinned to the canopy.

Shaded by the seagrapes,
the island takes hold
with grains of sand.

Cedars bloom,
blushing pink through
emerald hills
west to the jagged
granite cliffs
and east
amongst
smatterings
of corrugated roofs.

The seagrape tree
arches over this patch
of sand protectively,
waxen leaves spreading
open to a
single
white
sailed yacht

nodding its way
across the horizon.

V.

I hear the refrain of these snarled trunks
knee deep in sand and memory.
My footprints mimic those of broad backed men,
the whipping waters and the litany of keloids
and the seeping sores of the lash's persuasion.
The salt in the air carries to the plantation
but it is not the same to stand here,
my feet planted surely and washed by frothy wake.
My dog announces, along the beach somewhere,
a discovery – a piece of driftwood not unlike a snake.
I uproot myself, and count my sinking steps
towards his celebrations, the salted voices
singing behind me.

Sea Bath

It is like the matted moss that creeps
on the slatish rock, half buried in dense sand,
licked by the lapping sea.

You wash our daughter in the waters,
wise of the ways the sea can be cleansing,
how the wild brine clears the night's rattling
cough, rinses her nose of thick liquids.

Her protests dissolve in the clear waves,
she glows in the spinning sun.

I wash myself in view of the rippling hills,
baptize myself in this ocean's quiet corners.
A school of translucent minnows appear
beside my legs, feeding on my murky sins.

Man Ground

There will always be the sea,
beating against this man
ground I stand on,
that holds us up in life and
swallows us up,
grinding flesh and bone
to nothing.

A coral chorus blisters the coast
in the gloaming
but this man ground
I stand on is
still against
the rigid order of days

still against
the roaring spit of hurricanes
spinning off
the many mouths
of Africa.

This man ground
I stand on is
still against
me. Ectopic,

I break
like the sky
in shards.

The Domino Player

A man with a bird's mouth rises
from his easy chair, back bent
with the weight of his years, feet
purpling, swollen with gout.

Anger can stitch a smile to his lips,
his slitted eyes yellowed like the books
strewn in the rubble around his ruined body.

Amber glasses of rum leave his fingers
as easily as dominoes, the last years
of his life echo in the litany of tiles,
an eternity trying to find
his way back to the sea.

Boiling Bush

The waters train you to remember
what blade of bush can cut
a fever to beads overnight

what broad tongue
can lull your little one
to dream

to swim through the thick night
like darting barracuda.

The waters train you to trust
the steeping leaves
the greenness murkily
flooding the boiling pot

a memory returning
filling the water's
veined spaces.

When the morning
leaves us to ponder
the silt at the bottom of our cups,
the dregs are a remembrance
that cannot be drained.

Passionfruit

The seeds look like eyes glossy orbs peering
from the fruit's pulp
the hands that roll what remains
against the sieve`

a labour of longing must sacrifice
persistent knuckle and wrist
for yellow tartness
tempered with the heavy history of sugar
and work

the speckled fruits whose carcasses
lie halved, gutted
and spent sweetness
wrenched through the violence
of hands.

The spider resting on the rafter

twitches
when my wife switches on the light.

Its legs spread geometrically,
its eyes splice
the light into a
knitted tapestry of figures

Toussaint
Tacky
?

It rests there
plotting to rob us
of our

common sense with the gourd of its gut

to tie us to sticks, to strike us

dumb

with each prickly

limb, to add our story
to those that already
bear his name.

Beating a stone

for Kamau Brathwaite turning 85

On a still day, the blurry clouds sailing slowly
across the lagoon's glass confuses (up from down
sea and sky) until a skipping stone ripples,
distorts, and pauses for islands to bud
blossom like lilies in the places it has struck.

Watch the too black sea beat a rhythm
like calypso on the rocks. These gray and
coppery boulders line the shore,
a chiseled infantry to watch the spray whip up,
its milky froth falling on the level roads
that hem the island

This same too black sea was beating
this same rhythm, frenzied drumming on stones,
the machete falling on too black flesh,
a razored lash keeping the beat.

Mural

In a feature-
less, dockside dive
I am floating
in the dark waters
of my thoughts

when a man drags
me out dry
by his cough
no
a clearing
of phlegm
in his throat

when my eyes
lock his, he points
at the simmering sea,
aglit with sun.

“See ‘im?”

my eyes
are cast like lines
by his outstretched arm,

at something ruddy
and brown disturbing
the morning’s gentle wake

out there.

Out there,
a turtle is somersaulting
under a few mossy bits of seaweed
making them dance
messily on the surface.

I think
I think this
man should
he must be more
than a cook

more than a custodian
of cracking eggs
and sputtering oil

to see
the sea

a writhing mural
of hope and history
always carrying on.

On the Loss of Lovers

The old lady died of grief,
a black-laced hat, veil shielding her eyes
from the sun. The day before
we wheeled her nearer his casket.

A black-laced hat, veiled to shield her eyes,
sat on her bed next to her bible.
We wheeled her nearer his casket,
mourners made space in the aisle.

I sat on her bed next to her bible,
listening to her breathe as she slept.
Mourners made space in the aisle
for the family and the ceremony.

I listened for her breath. As she slept,
we told stories, the women made bouquets
for the ceremony and the family.
She always had her brandy with him.

We told stories. The women lay bouquets
in the sun the day before.
There was no more brandy with him.
The old lady died of grief.

All Ways are the Sea

i.

The night gathers about its wings
as school girls flutter
in a flock of pleated skirts,
their craning necks no longer powdered
waiting for some back footed duenne
to part the cane
somewhere near
an old man's voice clatters
against his stick which
he waves at the roaming cattle
the village's boys
gathering stones
their buoyant bones
do not alight here
where the sea is always
and all ways are the sea.

ii.

Imagine a rungless ladder
climbed unthinking
above pasture and road
the noble egret in the cow's egress
below the drooping yellow
love light-footed in the muck
the sea mutely chews the bay
like cud, an eternal colonizing
of space, or rock to sand, coast
gazing at the sinking sun
our sins cohere into clinging shadows
faces turned gently into wind
the flesh is still sin
the body the dominion of work
and the sea lies still
a reflecting pane.

iii.

Our bodies are comprised
entirely of elbows and knees
and hips parts that bend
under heat and heaviness
we must wonder what
decency tastes like in
the mouths of the decent
like the frothy fading fog
in the light distance hazing
the infinitely boring horizon
if in the night we disrobe
our skins under tamarinds
and blaze through the emptiness
like comets over the vast
ness of the bay and the openness
of our scars and hearts.

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Appendices

Appendix One – Alphaeus Osorio Norman

Figure 1. Amina Negroes

A band of the Amina sons
 Were captured and in slavery sold
 And so the awful story runs
 Were fettered in a vessel's hold.

Across the ocean they were hied
 These bravest sons of a brave clan
 Their galling fetters were untied
 And safely landed at Saint John

They suffered long, they labored hard
 They listened to their tribal bard
 He sang of freedom by the sword
 Their lives they pledged upon his word.

The Minas quitted the field and cane
 And joined in warfare with the Dane
 And upright as King Christian stood
 Nor cared they for that monarch's mood.

The boob; and the vendrigoes
 And much affrighted dark Eboes
 Looked on in horror and repose
 Upon the tournament of foes.

No Eboe joined the faithful band
 No Eboe lent a helping hand
 They did not see, they did not know
 When Minna Negroes struck that blow.

Another foe appeared in sight
 And moored his bark in Coral Bight
 Debarked his troops with armor bright
 And joined in the unequal fight.

The dark skinned warriors trained their guns
 And boldly charged the pale-faced ones
 As deer before the hunter runs
 They fled before Amina's sons.

And many a planter's blood was shed
 And many a maiden lost her head
 It was a day with carnage rife
 It was a day of mortal strife.

And yet another foe appeared
 And 'gainst those self-freed heroes reared
 His battle armaments nor cared
 How boldly they had stood or dared

Worn out at sinew, hip, and joint
 They now repaired to Mary's point
 And breathing out their last free whiff
 They leaped down from that rugged cliff.

Requiem! Resuscitate! Sing
 For them that feared not priest or king
 Who gave their all in freedom's cause
 Opposing Nordic tyrant's laws.

Who can forbid that prayers be said?
 Or carols changed for the dead?
 Or disbelieve that they shall rise
 on angels pinioned to the skies?

In classic hass and vulgar hut
 Locate the Amina Negro's gut
 Repeat their tale where'er the sun
 In his apparent orbit run.

Figure 2. Horseshoe's Reefs

Egyptian darkness reigns supreme
from Horseshoe Reef to Sopher's stream.
A hundred stately ships have found
their everlasting burial ground
upon the awful reefs and rocks
and from moles and graving docks.
And all because no warning light
shone out to warn those ships at night.

Prophetic vision comes to me
when flashing beacon I shall see
and Horseshoe's martyrs all shall raise
a tedium of joyous praise
to him whose word shall cause to rise
a flaming point to reach the skies.
And all because a warning light
shines out to warn those ships at night.

Figure 3. Loss of the HMS Valerian

Still vexed were the Bermudas
 Still were they tempest tost
 When the good ship *Valerian*
 And most her crew were lost

Manned by the sons of Britain
 The White ensign she flew
 Full armoured like a Titan
 She ploughed the ocean blue

Named for her strength in battle
 Named for strength at sea
 Amidst the tempest's rattle
 The good ship ceased to be

Valhalla cannot claim them
 They were not slain in war
 They seek a nobler realm
 The dwelling place of Thor

No tombs of human likings
 Their mortal bodies keep
 But like the ancient Vikings
 They sleep within the deep

Guards of the Gates of Fire
 Your rigid bolts undo
 They did not die in ire
 And they were guardsmen too

A marble column rear them
 Deck in with Immortelle
 And in the Towers of Salem
 There may their spirits dwell

For how could men die nobler?
 Than at their duties posts
 Forgive their every error
 And save them God of Hosts

Remember the *Valerian*
 And all her gallant crew
 For at their death Icarian
 They still were serving you.

Figure 4. Loss of the Schooner *Fancy Me*

A schooner named the *Fancy Me*
Was scudding in a gale.
She ran before a raging sea
With neatly shortened sail.

She had aboard Tortola's sons
Returning home again.
Her cargo was just fifteen tons
Of sugar from the cane.

The captain saw a storm was on
No haven was in sight.
Saona's wooden isle he won
No deep indented bight.

He anchored in an open road
The scene of many a wreck,
And thinking of his precious load
He slowly paced the deck.

He looked upon the rising moon
No weather glass has he.
"A hurricane is coming soon
Alas my *Fancy Me*".

The fated schooner's handsome shape
Was sheltered by the land.
The billows at Espada's cape
Were raging on the strand.

A heavy swell struck *Fancy Me*
Her iron cable rent.
Before the gale far out to sea
The hapless vessel went.

The sailors rigged a floating kedge
To keep her head to sea.
She sped on like a driven wedge
As helpless as could be.

The wind veered round due south it blew
And drove her back to land.
She struck a rock as near she drew
With all her mottled band.

The captain perished with his trust
As only hero dies,
And in Saona's clayery dust

His mouldering body lies.

Figure 5. The British Virgin Islands Negro

No longer rise the wails of woe
 No longer bleeds the dark Eboe
 The planter's shell has ceased to sound
 The massa's in the cold cold ground.

From Soper's Hole to Duckey's Bay
 The Black is lord of land and sea
 And title-deeds assert his right
 From Norman's Isle to Soldier's Bight.

No longer crack the driver's whips
 His sons go down to sea in ships
 He never feels the oppressor's hand
 His sons are owners of the land.

No more he bows to lords he meets
 His chariot rages in the streets
 No more his plaintive beggar's plea
 He orders on both land and sea.

He has forgotten his palmy plains
 He has forgiven the bloody stains
 No longer hears the abusive word
 For Hodge's slave is Belle Vue's lord.

He now performs his sacred rites
 Without restraint of envious Whites
 His empire's battles he has fought
 Gainst Prussian horde and Hottentot.

Tell of his rise from slavery's chains
 Tell of his lordship of the plains
 Tell of his mastery of the sea
 Tell of his faith and charity.

Figure 6. The Present as History

Fort Charlotte's guns are silent now,
Fort George's flag is down;
No sentry guards Fort Shirley's brow,
Defenseless is Road Town.

The whites who manned these ancient forts
Have vanished like the dew;
Their barks have left our friendly ports,
Likewise the pipes they blew.

But lo! I see they're coming back;
They're coming back to stay.
A hearty welcome they'll not lack
From Ebo, Kru, or Vey.

Figure 7. The Sea King's Death

I saw the ancient Sea King die
 No fear was on his brow or eye
 And as his voice he lifted high
 He praised the God of sea and sky.

He who had often crossed the line
 He who had seen Octantis shine
 Asked for a place in Adios' hall
 And bowed before the God of all.
 He who had weathered many gales
 And reckoned time by Ball and Scales
 He who had seen the scorpion's heart
 Pollux on his astral chart
 Now stood enveiled in crimson shroud
 And fixed his gaze on Odin's Hall
 And bowed before the God of all.

He knew the Noah's ark of the skies
 He had seen the Southern Cross arise
 He knew the Ethiop's two-seat chair
 He had seen the Northern Polar bear
 The wrath of man he did not fear
 Nor did he seek a house of prayer
 A conqueror's portion he would claim
 And Thor and Odin he did name.

Within his vessel's hold he stood
 Alone and in a joyous mood
 The roaring fire he did hear
 And shouted boldly, "I am here!"
 The tempest filled his vessel's sail
 She listed in the starboard rail
 All that was earthly disappeared
 As man and ship the tempest veered.

Appendix Two – Verna Penn Moll

Figure 1. Pelican Dive

In the land of my youth
 the brown pelican dives
 intelligence
 that fishermen may know
 where fishes beat
 in schools.

Sun shines through rain;
 periwinkles smother weeds
 along the roadside;
 While the spreading
 bougainvillea
 ignores drought.

The queen-conch shell
 announces the catch
 that breaks nets
 and draws a village
 to itself.

Figure 2. The Birth

The movement turned
 inside the groans
 of its mother
 in readiness to birth
 islands
 of volcanic larva.

From its interior
 mountains bulged
 valleys merged;
 piping-hot pain
 in contented agony
 wept tears that flowed
 into the Sea.

Figure 3. Connections

The lashing sea,
heaving, giving
islands
as waves tossed
in and out coves,
spoke of connections.

Swells
heavy upon the crest
of commerce
that peaked and fell
and rose again
upon the rolling tide.

Sea and isles
now caress
in reconciliatory
reflection.

Figure 4. The Knowing Pool

Bathe me in the sultry Sea
and preserve me in its wisdom
let its waves pour o'er me
its healing charms
and property.

Steep me in its knowing pool!
Let its currents caress my head
that I may know its depth,
its language; its breadth
and power.

Sail me through its culture
and season me in its customs
to re-tell its stories
its myths, its truths
its legends.

Figure 5. The Fisherman's Nets

In the wee hours after three
the net was cast
into the sea
for the great round
of seine-fish
and cavalli.

A heavy evening haul
late for market
netted and pegged
the catch near shore
in the crawl
for cold storage.

There was another option:
splitting, gutting,
sea-salt corning:
preservation
in timely
operation.

But no delicacy
is so tasty
as cavalli
steamed down
with cream sauce
and *ochro-fungie*.

The fisherman's seines
net food for thought
on patterned page:
social topics
composition
and heritage.

Appendix Three – British Virgin Islands

Figure 1. Tourist Board Logo

